

“A Question about Divorce”

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We live in a complicated, messy world. It’s a world that can be beautiful, but it’s also a fallen world. It’s fallen because of sin, our rebellion against God. Sin causes a separation between us and God, but also a separation between us and other people. That means that things don’t often go the way we would like them to go. Life can be difficult. Relationships can be difficult. And that is certainly true of the most important human relationship we have: marriage.

Marriage is a God-made institution. It precedes any form of government. Therefore, it’s more fundamental to a healthy society than government. I think you could make a case that as marriages go, so a country goes. But marriages are messy because they involve two sinful people who are joined together. What happens when marriage doesn’t go as planned?

Over the past few weeks, I’ve been answering questions that people submitted to us in person or online. One of the questions that was submitted through the church website is, “If your husband is emotionally abusive, financially abusive and just an overall jerk, and I file for divorce am I still loved by God? Can I be water baptized?” There’s a lot there. This woman is wondering if it’s permissible to divorce a husband who is emotionally abusive, financially irresponsible, and, to use her words, “an overall jerk.” She’s wondering if God would still love her if she divorced. And then she’s wondering if she could get baptized.

I’ll spend most of my time on that first question, related to divorce. Is divorce ever something that God permits? If so, when? And what happens if we make a mistake in marriage, whether by marrying someone we probably shouldn’t have, or by divorcing when we really shouldn’t have?

To answer these questions, we’ll first look at Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew. Please turn to Matthew 19:1–9.

¹ Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

³ And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh.

What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”⁸ 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.⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”¹

Let me give us some context here. Jesus went to Judea, the region of Jerusalem, the chief Jewish city. And while there, some Jewish religious leaders called Pharisees tried to test Jesus by asking a question about divorce. At that time, there were two opinions about divorce, based on a passage in the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The passage talks about what happens when a wife “finds no favor” in the eyes of her husband “because he has found some indecency in her.” One rabbi, Shammai, taught that the “indecency” was sexual immorality. Another rabbi, Hillel, thought this “indecency” could be almost anything, such as ruining a dish that she made for her husband. The Pharisees wanted to know where Jesus stood on divorce, perhaps because Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, divorced his wife to marry a woman who had divorced his brother (Matt. 14:3–4). The Pharisees probably wanted Jesus to get in trouble. After all, Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, got into trouble for telling Herod it was “not lawful for you to have her,” referring to Herodias, his brother’s former wife.

Jesus makes two major points in his answer. The first is to remind the Pharisees of God’s design for marriage. He says, in verses 4 and 5, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?” He’s quoting two passages from the Old Testament. One is Genesis 1:27 and the other is Genesis 2:24.

His quotation of Genesis 1:27 is interesting, because the controversy is about divorce. Jesus didn’t have to quote Genesis 1:27, which says that God created people male and female. But he does because the fact that God created people male and female is very much a part of the definition of marriage. God’s design for marriage is one man and one woman united for life.

Then Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 and he ascribes this verse to God. He says that “he who created . . . said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” Genesis 2:24 isn’t a quotation of God speaking. It’s the narrator, Moses, describing the importance of God creating Eve for Adam, so that the two could

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

be married. But Jesus says this is God speaking. This is one of those verses that show that Jesus believed the Old Testament is God's written Word, even as he wrote it through human authors like Moses.²

While the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders were debating about how to interpret the law that God gave the Israelites through Moses, Jesus brings them back to the creation of mankind and marriage. He reminds them that God made man and woman to be married, to become a one-flesh union. "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." This is God's design for marriage. It is a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:14) that should join a man and a woman for life.

Jesus' opponents then say, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" Actually, if you read Deuteronomy 24, it's clear that Moses didn't command divorce. This is what the passage says,

¹ "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then 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 out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Moses doesn't command a divorce. He's talking about a messy situation. A man divorces his wife because he is not satisfied with her, because she has committed "some indecency." She goes and marries another man, who divorces her, too. In that case, her first husband shouldn't marry her again. I suppose the reason that would be "an abomination before the LORD" is that it makes a mockery of marriage. Marriage shouldn't be like someone bouncing between cell phone providers every two years. That's what a contract is like. But marriage is a covenant. It's not a matter of who gives you the best deal. It's a treaty consisting of promises made by two people who become one.

² For more on this subject, see "Jesus Believed the Old Testament Is the Word of God," the sermon I preached on March 1, 2015: <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

At any rate, Jesus says that Moses allowed divorce only because the Israelites had hard hearts. If there were no sin in the world, there would be no divorce. But given that there are messy situations caused by sin, divorce is permissible in some situations. Moses was more concerned with how the divorce (and remarriage) would be handled. Jesus makes one of the situations where it is permissible to divorce clear. He says, “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” So, divorce in the case of unfaithfulness is allowed.³ If a man cheats on his wife, she may divorce him. But notice that Jesus doesn’t command divorce. He says that divorce in this situation is an exception to the rule that marriage is for life. Yet in the case of infidelity, there is always the option of repentance on the part of the guilty spouse and forgiveness on the part of the innocent spouse. Yet if the one who committed adultery persists in that relationship, it is as if the marriage is over in the eyes of God. If one spouse wants to violate the covenant of marriage through infidelity and doesn’t want to repent, the other spouse should not be bound to stay in this situation.

Though Jesus mentions only one exception in this passage, it’s not the only one. The other grounds for divorce given in the Bible is mentioned in a passage in 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter, Paul is talking to a very immature, troubled church about marriage and sex. In the chapter, he says it’s better to be single, because one is able to serve the Lord without distractions. (That shows that you don’t have to be married to be fulfilled in Christ. Single Christians are not inferior to married ones.) But he also says that marriage is appropriate for many. It seems that some in the church in Corinth thought that because they’re Christians, they shouldn’t have sex, or even should no longer be married. So, Paul tells them to stay married.

That’s what Paul says in verses 10 and 11:

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

When Paul says, “not I, but the Lord,” he is reminding the Corinthians of what Jesus said during his time on earth. Those who are married shouldn’t separate (unless one spouse commits adultery). Being married is a good thing for Christians, just as being single is a good thing.

³ Jesus also makes this exception in Matt. 5:31–32. The exception is not mentioned in Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18. However, when we come to theological conclusions, we must synthesize various texts of the Bible. We can’t pick and choose here and there.

Then Paul gives one more reason why divorce is permissible. Let's read verses 12–16:

¹²To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵But 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. ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Paul teaches something that Jesus didn't mention during his earthly ministry. That's why Paul now says, "I, not the Lord." Of course, as Jesus' apostle, Paul's words here *are* God's Word. They are not opposed to Jesus' words. Paul says that if a believer has an unbelieving wife, and she agrees to live with him, then he shouldn't divorce her. And, if a Christian woman has an unbelieving husband, and he agrees to live with her, then she shouldn't divorce him. Paul is addressing a situation that must have been common in the earliest years of Christianity. One spouse of a couple that is already married becomes a Christian and the other doesn't. Some may have wondered if it would be appropriate to call off the marriage, since both spouses didn't share the same faith. That lack of being on the same religious page would create some problems in the marriage.

But Paul says that if the unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage, there is no need to divorce. He even says the unbelieving spouse is "made holy" because of the believing spouse. Here's what he doesn't mean. He doesn't mean the unbelieving spouse has the believer's status. The unbeliever is not saved from sin and condemnation. He or she isn't in a right relationship with God. Each person must have faith in Jesus in order to receive the gift of salvation. What Paul means is that this marriage to an unbeliever doesn't defile the believer. It doesn't make the Christian somehow "unclean." This would be how people coming from a Jewish background might view the situation. Paul probably also means that the unbelieving spouse is "set apart" because he has certain benefits by being married to a Christian, such as receiving a Christian witness. A non-Christian married to a Christian has a better chance of becoming a Christian than someone who isn't around Christians, just as a child growing up in a Christian home has a better chance of becoming a Christian than a child who doesn't grow up in that environment.

But here's what we want to pay attention to: Paul says that if the unbelieving spouse wants to separate the believer, then so be it. The Christian who has been left by his or her unbelieving spouse is no longer enslaved. He or she is free. In verse 39, Paul says this: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." So, what Paul probably means here is that if an unbelieving spouse deserts the believer, the believer is free to remarry.⁴ And he finishes his thought by saying that though it's possible the unbelieving spouse may be saved by being married to a Christian, there is no guarantee. If the non-Christian wants out, there is little a Christian can do to make his or her spouse stay.

Today, it's very easy to get divorced. It only takes one spouse to want to get divorced. We must keep that in mind when we talk about divorce and remarriage for Christians. At my last church, there was a woman whose husband divorced her. Right when I arrived at the church, she started attending. And that was the time when her husband wanted a divorce. (He didn't attend the church.) She didn't want a divorce and was asking us to pray that he would change his mind. But he didn't, so they divorced. This was not her fault. We shouldn't condemn someone to a life of singleness because of another person's sin.

So, let's recap. So far, we've seen that God's intent for marriage is a lifelong union of one man and one woman. But, in a fallen world, there are two permissible ways for a marriage to end in divorce: if one spouse commits adultery or one spouse deserts the marriage. Paul imagines that a non-Christian would leave the marriage. I think it's safe to assume that he thinks two Christians should not abandon the marriage, even if there are problems. I'm sure Paul and Jesus would hold two Christians to a higher standard. Nowhere in the Bible do we find the idea that it's okay to leave a marriage because things are hard, or because we lack certain feelings.

That brings me back to the question about divorce. Is it permissible to divorce a spouse who is abusive? In this case, the husband is verbally abusive and "financially abusive," which probably means he doesn't share his money with his wife or he gets into debt or something along those lines.

If I were talk to the woman who asked this question, I would want to know what this abuse looks like. Is the husband just a bit mean or is he making her life a living hell? I would want to know because we have to balance two things. One, we should always hope for

⁴ Remarriage after the death of a spouse is certainly permitted, as Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39 indicate.

reconciliation. In the case that someone is abusive, we should pray that such a person who would repent. We should pray that, if this man were not a Christian, he would come to faith through the witness of his wife. After all, the apostle Peter writes this:

¹ Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives,
² when they see your respectful and pure conduct (1 Pet. 3:1–2).

That being said, I don't know that Peter is thinking of a situation where the husband is abusive.

The other thing we have to balance is the welfare of the woman. If the husband is truly abusive, she may need to leave the home, and perhaps stay with family or a friend. During that time, she should pray and seek some outside counsel. If she is part of a church, I would urge her to talk to the pastor or elders of the church. Perhaps she could talk to the husband's friends or family. The goal should be his repentance and a restoration of the marriage to health. But the woman doesn't need to sacrifice her physical safety or mental well-being.

If the man persists in being abusive and won't repent, I think it's possible that the woman could file for divorce. But I would want her to seek every alternative before doing that. I think it's possible to view the man's abuse in the same way that we might view desertion or abandonment. The man, by his unacceptable behavior, is essentially terminating the covenant of marriage. Not all covenants are unconditional. Some of the covenants in the Bible were conditioned on certain behavior. The covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was conditioned on their obedience (Exod. 19:5–6). In the case of marriage, something serious like infidelity or abandonment can terminate that covenant. The Bible doesn't specifically talk about physical or emotional abuse, but it seems like these things fall in line with the other grounds for divorce.

This may be a bad analogy, but I view divorce sort of like war. War is the result of sin in the world, and we should try to avoid going to war when possible. We should try to exhaust all the other options, such as diplomatic actions and sanctions. But there are times when the other party won't cooperate. And, in such cases, war is permitted. It seems that the same is true of divorce.

I don't say any of this lightly. I take marriage very seriously. And I would urge people to be very, very careful before even thinking about divorce. So many divorces have nothing to do with infidelity or real abuse. It seems like most divorces occur because people are no longer

happy. We have been fooled into thinking that marriage is about our happiness. But marriage wasn't designed primarily to make us happy. I believe that God designed marriage because he designed the family to have both a male and a female. Men and women are different. They complement one another. God designed children who need both a father and a mother. Families that are held together by the bond of marriage are more stable and, all things being equal, healthier. Healthy and stable families lead to healthy and stable societies.

But there's another reason why God created marriage. God created marriage to point to the true marriage between himself and his people.

In another one of Paul's letters, the book of Ephesians, he says that women are supposed to submit to their husbands, because just as Jesus is the head of the church, so the husband is the head of his wife (Eph. 5:22–23). Therefore, wives are supposed to submit to their husbands the way that the church submits to Christ (Eph. 5:24). Husbands, for their part, are supposed to love their wives the way that Jesus loved the church. Jesus gave his very life to pay for his people's sins, to cleanse them. He sacrificed himself for the good of the church. That's the way that husbands are supposed to love their wives (Eph. 5:25–28). Paul is describing the ideal Christian marriage.

But then Paul says something striking. He writes this, beginning in Ephesians 5:31:

³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, just like Jesus did. But he says that this verse actually refers to Christ and the church. This is a mystery, something that was previously undisclosed. Now, Paul is revealing the true meaning of marriage. Marriage between a man and a woman is a foreshadowing of the true marriage, between Jesus and the church. Throughout the whole Bible, the relationship between God and his people is likened to a marriage. Why? Well, that relationship between God and his people is supposed to be exclusive, the way a marriage is. God's people should have no other gods, no other objects of worship. The relationship between God and his people is marked by love and trust, the way a good human marriage is. And the relationship between God and his people unites them in a bond that can't be broken. The best human marriages end in death, but not even death can separate a Christian from Jesus.

That means, on the one hand, we shouldn't take marriage lightly. Marriage is meant to point us to the true marriage between God and his people. Human marriages prepare us for that divine marriage. If we get our marriage to a human wrong, we'll likely not get the true marriage right, either.

Marriage teaches us to forgive. After all, to stay married to another sinner requires a lot of forgiveness. Marriage teaches us to persevere through hard times, to love another even when you don't feel like you're in love. We need forgiveness and perseverance in the Christian life. Human marriages don't exist primarily to make us happy. They exist to make us holy, set apart for God.

There are other reasons not to take marriage lightly. Marriage doesn't just affect two people. It affects society in numerous ways. If there are any children produced by the marriage, they will be affected by divorce. But so will other family members and friends. And all the broken families, taken as a whole, tax our society (quite literally) by causing a great deal of economic instability.

But, on the other hand, the fact that the true marriage is between Christ and the church means that we shouldn't expect too much of human marriage. I suppose we often fail in human marriage because we expect too much of it. We can make our spouse an idol, expecting that person to fulfill us, to give us the security, meaning, acceptance, and love that only Jesus can. It is only in the true marriage of Jesus and the church that true happiness will be found. Husbands, your wives will disappoint you. Wives, you know your husbands already do disappoint you. We are waiting for the marriage to our true spouse, Jesus. He will never let us down.

With all of that in mind, I would plead with people to avoid divorce if it is at all possible to reconcile. I would tell people to slow down, to pray, to think, to get wise counsel. But there are times when divorce may be inevitable.

If that is the case, will you lose the love of God by being divorced?

If you are united to Jesus because you trust that he is your only hope, you cannot be removed from the love of God. If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth to live the perfectly righteous life that you don't live, and that he died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin, then nothing you can remove you from the true marriage of Jesus and his people. If God has changed you so that you have been born again into a new creation through the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing can undo that change of status.

Paul says in yet another of his letters, the book of Romans, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). He says that because salvation is based on Jesus’ righteous life and sacrificial death (see Rom. 3:21–26; 5:1–21). Jesus fulfilled God’s demands for a perfectly obedient covenant partner. And Jesus died in place of sinners, so that their sins could be punished. Not only that, but the whole process of salvation is accomplished by God (Rom. 8:28–30). That is why Paul can say these words (Rom. 8:31–39):

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because there is sin in the world, marriage is difficult. And it really is. Two sinners, even if they’re reconciled to God, are in a relationship that will cause them to butt heads. There is going to be conflict, and both spouses will fail in many ways. We need God’s grace to cover those failures. And if we have been forgiven by God, we need to forgive each other (Matt. 6:12).

And because of sin, many people end up marrying people they probably shouldn’t have married. In that case, people need God’s grace. They need grace to persevere in marriages that are hard, that are frequently disappointing. Even when we marry other believers who are well-suited to us, we need that kind of grace to persevere. If you’re in that situation, call out to God for strength, for hope, and for healing. And think about this: apart from Christ, you would be a disappointment to God, to put it mildly. We have all been lousy spouses to Jesus. We have failed to submit to his leadership. We have failed to respect and honor him and obey him. We have failed to love him as we ought to. Yet Jesus doesn’t give up on us. We shouldn’t give up on our spouses.

But if we have divorced, or if our spouse persists in adultery or abandonment or abuse, and we have no other recourse than divorce, we need God's grace. We need to know that a divorce is not an unforgiveable sin. We shouldn't brand divorced people with a scarlet "D", marking them out as unclean. And even if they have contributed to their divorce through some sin, they can be cleansed because of Jesus' sacrifice for them. If God can forgive adulterers and murderers and thieves and idolaters, he can forgive divorced people, too.

That doesn't mean we should take marriage and divorce lightly. If we love Jesus, we'll do marriage on his terms, not ours. And we will try to avoid divorce. We don't sin so that God's grace would abound. But if our marriage falls apart, there is a better marriage that waits for us. In that marriage, our spouse will never let us down. He will never cheat on us, never abandon us, never forsake us, and never abuse us.

So, if you get a divorce, will God still love you? If you're truly "in Christ" because you trust, love, and follow him, and because God has transformed you, God will always love you. If you have that relationship with Jesus, you will trust that only Jesus can give you the security, acceptance, love, and happiness that you long for. And if you have that kind of faith, yes, you can and should get baptized. Baptism is like a wedding ceremony. It is public demonstration of a commitment that has already been made. In the case of a wedding, two people who already love each other and who have already decided to live together for life make promises before witnesses. They promise in front of God and their family and friends that they will be in this marriage for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do them part. In the case of a baptism, a person has already put his or her faith in Jesus, and now says, in front of God and Christian family, that there is no turning back. But in this marriage, there will be no end.