

Series: "Single. Married." (Part 5)
"What the Bible Says About Divorce"

Very few people are not touched by the reality of divorce. Some reading this are divorced. Many have family members or friends who are divorced. I could hardly preach a series on marriage and being single without touching on this subject that affects so many people today.

Adam Hamilton, whose sermons have formed the basis for this series of sermons, says that we really need to preach 3 or 4 messages in one when we address the topic of divorce. Different groups in the congregation need to hear different messages.

For example, some here are divorced, but you *didn't want that*. Your spouse filed for divorce, or perhaps left you for someone else. As a result, you need to hear of God's goodness, mercy, and healing. But if I talk about how merciful and understanding God is, will I be *encouraging* someone to *get a divorce* if they're in a marriage where they're not happy? I'm not sure I would want to do that. And, if I preach about staying in the marriage and working things out, will I just be laying a guilt trip on those in a marriage that's so sick and so bad that maybe ending the marriage would be the best thing to do under the circumstances?

So, I will preach about 4 sermons in one today (not long ones!). Try not to jump the gun and get upset at what I say, because some of what I say may not be appropriate for you in your particular situation.

The place I want to start is to look at what the Bible says about divorce. There isn't a whole lot in the Bible about divorce. But we will look at some Scriptures in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Christians *differ* on how they interpret the Bible on this matter. So, I encourage you to study the verses we will be looking at on your own, and come to your own conclusions.

There are words about divorce in the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says this: "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." This Scripture says that a man can write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away if finds some "indecency" in her. As will see in a moment, a lot hinges on how one defines what an "indecency" is. Note here that, by and large in the Old Testament, it was the *man* who had the right to divorce. Also, nowhere in the Law of Moses does it say, "Don't

ever get a divorce”. The Old Testament law presupposes that in a world of fallible human beings, this will happen!

Major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah talked about divorce. But it is *God* who is getting a divorce from His people! In Jeremiah 3:8 God says, “I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries.”

Around 438 B.C. the **priest Ezra** saw that Jewish men were marrying foreign women. The problem was not the foreign women, but their *pagan religions*. Ezra was concerned about holiness and preserving the Hebrew faith. So he instructs the Jewish men to divorce their *foreign* wives and send them away (Ezra 10:3).

When we get to the last book of the Old Testament, the Book of **Malachi**, Jewish men are starting to divorce their *Hebrew wives*! This was creating a barrier between God and His people. God no longer would regard their offerings and worship. Malachi 2:13-14 says, “Another thing you do: You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, ‘Why?’ It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.”

When people married, God was part of that covenant! Back then people married very young, perhaps 14 years of age. Divorcing their wives meant forsaking the wife of one’s youth, and the covenant made, and the chance to bear godly offspring. The prophet Malachi goes on: “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 2:15b-16).

Let’s turn now to the New Testament. Do you remember in the Christmas story, Joseph almost divorced Mary! They were “betrothed”. In terms of the law, betrothed couples were already married. When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, but not to him, he decided to divorce her quietly, until the angel told him the child in her was of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus spoke about divorce. One day the Pharisees came to Jesus with a question, to trap Him. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause” (Matthew 19:3)? Jesus replied that from the beginning of creation, God’s purpose was that a husband and wife would be joined together in a *lifelong* union. “‘Haven’t you read,’ (Jesus) 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 no one separate”’ (Matthew 19:4-6). The Pharisees then

countered: Why then did Moses allow a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce (a reference to the Scripture we looked at in Deuteronomy 24)? Jesus responds that Moses permitted this because of the hardness of people's hearts, but this was not God's intention from the beginning. "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8). Then these hard words of Jesus: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

Jesus says that for a man to divorce his wife and remarry is adultery – but there is an exception: unchastity. The Greek word used in this Scripture passage is the word "porneia" (from which we get the English word pornography). In some versions of the Bible the word is translated "unchastity" or "sexual immorality". The word in the Greek is a general term describing many types of sexual immorality (which can include adultery). In other words, Jesus is saying, "God's ideal is that marriage last a lifetime. *But...*there are exceptions where divorce is allowed."

However, in the Gospel of Mark this passage of Scripture reads differently. Where Jesus says divorce and remarriage is adultery, *no exception is given!* "When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, '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 10:10-12).

The Apostle Paul has some words about divorce. "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): 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" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Notice, he says, "A wife must not separate from her husband...*but if she does...*". He states the ideal – but realizes some can't live up to this standard for a variety of reasons. Later Paul talks to Christians married to unbelievers, and says if your unbelieving partner consents to remain with you, don't divorce. But if an unbelieving partner wants to leave, let him or her go – you are no longer bound in marriage. "If the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances" (1 Corinthians 7:15). So, he introduces another way to allow divorce!

So, what conclusions can we draw from all of these Scripture passages?

1. God's intention is that marriage last a lifetime. Jesus made that clear. Every divorce is a failure to achieve God's highest purpose. So, in that sense, every divorce is a "sin", in that it falls short of God's highest will for us.

2. Divorce is a serious matter, and should never be regarded lightly. Jesus' strong words against divorce should be seen in the context of what was happening back in His time. Jewish rabbis differed in how they interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1, where it says a man was allowed to divorce his wife in the case of some "indecent". The conservative school, led by Rabbi Shammai, maintained that divorce is *never* permissible. On the other hand, the liberal school, under Rabbi Hillel, said a man could divorce his wife for the most trivial of reasons – taking her hair down in public, talking to other men, even just burning the bread when baking - and *this was the school that was most popular in Jesus' time!* At the time of Jesus, marriage had become trivialized and cheapened. In that scenario, Jesus emphasizes the *sacredness* of the marriage vows and covenant. And every effort should be made to preserve the holiness of the marriage vows.

3. However, because we live in world of sinful, fallible human beings, some marriages don't last. All of Scripture – *including Jesus' words quoted in Matthew* – seems to recognize this fact of life and make allowances for it.

With the truth of these Scriptures in mind, let's apply them to differing situations. First, ***to those considering marriage.*** Remember, marriage is a lifelong commitment. On our wedding day, it's not a matter of promising to stay together "as long as things work out", or "as long as we are in love". Feelings come and go. But a couple promise to stay together "till death us do part." In most wedding ceremonies a couple is asked: will you be faithful to each other "as long as you both shall live"? Having that commitment of staying together through thick and thin is an important ingredient for a successful and enduring marriage.

Since marriage is a lifelong commitment, before you get carried away by the emotion of the moment, you should take time to get to know the person you plan to marry. Is this a person I can respect? Do we share similar faith and values? When the "high" of the first stage – the romantic stage – subsides, do we have enough in common to build a lifelong friendship?

Next, a word to ***those who are married, and perhaps thinking about divorcing.*** Probably all married people have at times *thought about divorce* - maybe even threatened to get a divorce. But one of the best things we can do is erase that word from our vocabulary. Don't even go there!

It's easy when things aren't going well in a marriage to get into *magical thinking*, and imagine how better things would be if we called it quits. Often, when couples separate, there is an immediate sense of relief. Perhaps there is less arguing and fighting. Things are peaceful! What a person often fails to think about, however, are Christmas mornings when the kids aren't with you, or the extra expenses and decline

in one's economic status, or coming home at night to an empty house, or having to function as a single parent, or the awkwardness of dating again, or maybe even eventually marrying someone worse than our ex-spouse! Research provides pretty consistent evidence that divorce has negative consequences financially, emotionally, physically, spiritually, psychologically – and it often takes a toll on children.

So, if you are in a marriage that's not going well, or if you are thinking of exiting to greener pastures, I encourage you to make *every effort* to stay in the marriage, and work at it. Get counseling. Remember what I said last week, that even if loving feelings for your husband or wife are gone, they can be recovered if both partners will hang in there, and seek to work things out.

I want to speak *to those whose spouses have left or have initiated a divorce*. You wanted the marriage to last. Perhaps you still loved the person. But that person chose not to stay. Those of us who have not gone through this can't really know your pain. God's word to those of you in that situation is one of goodness and mercy. God understands what you're going through. He knows it wasn't something you wanted. And He wants to heal you, bring you through the pain of divorce, and give you a future and a hope!

Finally, a word *to those sincere Christians who are struggling in a marriage that is unhealthy and very dysfunctional*. You believe marriage is for keeps. As a Christian and because of your spiritual convictions you don't want to break the marriage covenant – but your marriage is so sick and destructive. Maybe your partner insists on having an affair or affairs, with no remorse. Perhaps you're in an abusive situation. It seems clear that divorce is the lesser of two evils. But it's still hard for you to let go and call it quits.

Other situations are more gray. Maybe your partner has no interest in Christian things, and isn't happy when you get involved in church, or he or she consistently lies to you, or is irresponsible with money and runs up significant credit card debt, or refuses to be intimate, or is very controlling, or is just a very selfish, inconsiderate person. I'm thinking about an older lady, a member of a church I served as pastor. Her husband was a leader in the church, and a Sunday School teacher. This woman came to me one day and confided how all her life her husband had lorded it over her. He drank heavily. He was inconsiderate and abusive. But she stuck it out over many years, keeping information about her home life private, because she felt the Bible taught that she had to be submissive to her husband. But in my office this sweet, godly lady bared her soul. I could sense the enormous rage that had built up inside of her over many years.

Situations like this can be a hard call! When do you come to that point when you

have had enough, and *leaving your spouse and getting a divorce is justified?* I've counseled any number of people in this situation. I don't try to tell them what to do, when "enough is enough" in their particular situation. That's their decision. For those who have tried everything they know – but their spouse is simply not interested in changing or working on the marriage, I believe there are those times when the better choice is to cut the chord. I can't believe Jesus is saying, "Well, I'm sorry, but you have to stay with that spouse regardless, even if it's a living hell."

God hates divorce! God intends marriage to be a blessing for each partner, a bond that brings joy and satisfaction through a lifelong commitment of love and faithfulness. But I do believe there are those instances when Jesus looks at His children with tender eyes and says, "OK, it's time to move on."

You see what I meant when I said I'd need to preach about 4 sermons in one? We are at different places with different needs when it comes to divorce. And I hope and pray that somehow God has spoken a word for you today.

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