

# Marriage and Divorce

## A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

Divorce has become very common in our society and the church is not immune to its affects. Many Christians pursue divorce and probably all of us have known people who have been divorced. More often than not someone who is in some way connected to our church is heading toward divorce or in the midst of a divorce.

It is our desire to help each married couple to experience God's blessing upon their life and part of our ministry is to teach what the Bible says about marriage and divorce. It is unfortunate that there is no universal agreement among Christians, but this does not mean that the Scripture is unclear about the subject. The problem appears to lie more with the application of the Bible in the difficult situations of life than with the correct understanding of the biblical teaching. However, proper interpretation precedes proper application.

### **What the Bible says about marriage**

*Marriage is from God, not man.*

Marriage is an institution established by God. From the beginning of the Old Testament God established the permanent marital covenant. Genesis 2:24 teaches that the husband and wife are "one flesh" which no man should separate (cf. Matthew 19:4-6).

More than that, Jesus said, "what God has joined together, let no man separate." Therefore, when a couple is married, God is joining them together.

*Marriage is between a man and a woman.*

Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:4-6 clearly set marriage as being between one man and one woman.

*Marriage is good.*

Not only did God design marriage, He also says it is good (Proverbs 18:22). It was even used as a picture of God's relationship with His chosen people, Israel (Isaiah 49:18; 62:5) and later to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the Church (1 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:32).

*Marriage is not for everyone.*

Matthew 19:12 describes people who have chosen to remain single for the sake of the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 7:25-35 describes reasons for choosing to remain single in light of present difficulties (7:26) which lead to additional concerns in this present life. Singleness should not be seen as second rate, but as a valid alternative that has certain advantages in serving the Lord.

*Marriage forms a new family.*

The meaning behind the idea of a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife (Genesis 2:24) is that a new family is created.

*The man is the head of the wife and family.*

Ephesians 5:22-24 teaches the role of the husband and wife, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.”

If we confuse these God-designed roles, trouble follows. Many, even Christians, have sought to undermine the position of the husband in the marriage relationship. This has served to damage marriages and more importantly, has dishonored the Lord by ignoring His Word.

*In marriage the man and woman become one flesh.*

Marriage involves leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24). This joining is the physical union between the husband and wife and is a part of marriage. 1 Corinthians 6:16 shows that the physical union in itself does not produce an indissoluble bond.

Of course marriage is more than two people who have moved in together, it is two people who have publicly committed themselves to each other as husband and wife. It is this union that is intended to be inseparable (Matthew 19:6).

*Christians must marry Christians.*

1 Corinthians 7:39 provides freedom in choosing whether to marry and who to marry with one restriction, the woman must marry “in the Lord,” meaning a fellow believer in Christ. In addition, 2 Corinthians 6:14 teaches us not to be “bound together with unbelievers.” This command must apply to marriage since there is no earthly commitment more binding upon us than marriage.

### **What the Bible says about divorce**

Marriage is a covenant (Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14). Furthermore, covenants are designed to be kept (Numbers 30:2; Ecclesiastes 5:4-6). God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) and so should we.

We believe that marriage was intended by God to be for as long as both people are alive (Romans 7:1-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39). Therefore, we do not encourage divorce. For those in physical danger or for some other reason feel they are unable to remain with their marriage partner, we recommend separation rather than divorce. This separation is with the hope of one day seeing the restoration, through God’s grace, of what God joined together.

However, there is a difference between what God intends and what God allows. There are two passages that allow for divorce under certain circumstances:

*Matthew 19:3-12 allows for divorce when the spouse commits immorality.*

In Matthew 19, Jesus is asked about the permission to divorce granted by Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus describes God's ideal that marriage should be permanent, and that divorce and remarriage results in adultery, with an exception - immorality. Immorality is a term referring to acts of a sexual nature, most notably adultery. If a spouse has indeed broken the sexual bond, the other partner is not guilty of adultery by ending the relationship and remarrying.

However, the immorality should be known for a fact, not merely assumed. We have no right to end our marriage based upon our suspicions alone. Also, lust is a sin and considered by Jesus as adultery in the heart (Matthew 5:28), but it is not in itself technically an act of immorality.

We understand that passages such as Matthew 5:31-32, Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18 do not include an exception for the case of immorality. However, the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 is sufficient to allow for divorce in the case of immorality.

*1 Corinthians 7:15 allows for divorce when a spouse who is not a Christian abandons their husband or wife.*

1 Corinthians 7:15 states that a believer is not under bondage if an unbeliever leaves. Not under bondage indicates that divorce is allowed in this situation. In addition to the believer having been abandoned, he or she has no expectation of God's Spirit to work to bring conviction to the heart of the departing spouse in that they have never submitted themselves to God through faith.

It is important to note that unlike the first exception, in this case the believer cannot initiate the divorce. If this occurs, Paul teaches that he should be allowed to leave. The believer cannot be bound to a marriage that no longer exists.

### **What the Bible says about remarriage**

It is sometimes claimed that the Bible allows divorce in certain cases, but not remarriage. However each of the two exceptions include remarriage.

While the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 is linked to the divorce clause, it must be understood as applying to the entire sentence. There is only one situation that is discussed in Matthew 19:9, an individual who has divorced and remarried. It does not discuss a person who divorces and does not remarry. The one who divorces his wife except for immorality is the same individual who remarries. The two issues cannot be separated.

Also, by separating divorce from remarriage in Matthew 19:9 we are led to the odd conclusion that someone who divorces his wife, with the exception of immorality, commits adultery. That is, we are forced to say that divorce by itself is equal to adultery. Remarriage must be understood as well as divorce in Matthew 19:9.

In the case of 1 Corinthians 7:15, to say that a brother or sister is not under bondage in cases where an unbelieving spouse leaves implies that the believer has the freedom to remarry given the action of abandonment. To say remarriage is forbidden places a restriction upon the believer. This is also supported by 1 Corinthians 7:27-28, which says if you choose to remarry, you have not sinned.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage has been instituted by God as a covenant relationship to bring a man and woman together for the purpose of companionship (Genesis 2:18) in order to serve God. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) yet because of the failings of man He allows for divorce and remarriage in the case of adultery and desertion by an unbelieving spouse.

Yet divorce should not be understood as a necessary option in cases of immorality. We have the opportunity to trust in God's grace and exercise forgiveness, for mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). In cases of being divorced by an unbelieving spouse our goal should be to seek for peace and allow the unbeliever to leave without a fight.

Finally, when divorce occurs it is a very difficult situation even under the best circumstances. God's grace is sufficient for all those who draw near to Him from a truly submissive heart. For those who love God and are called according to His purpose, He promises to work all things together for good (Romans 8:28). The present attitude of our heart is more important than our past choices we have made.

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