

Marriage and Divorce

What Does The Bible Really Say?

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Introduction

There are few areas of life where more harm has been inflicted on hurting souls by ministers themselves than in the turbulent and delicate area of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I have seen hearts broken and homes divided by the misguided counsel of religious leaders – well-meaning men and women, certainly, but without the knowledge of God. “*The wisdom that is from above*”, wrote James, “*is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.*” The truth about God’s will concerning marriage and divorce will bring peace and other good fruits into the lives of those who receive it, and that is the true measure of all teachings that really come from God.

Within the community of believers, there are two basic groups, regarding marital status. They are as follows:

1. The Unmarried
 - A. Those who have never married.
 - B. Widows and Widowers.
 - C. Those divorced before their conversion.
2. The Married
 - A. Those married to another believer.
 - B. Those married to an unbeliever.
 - C. Separation and divorce.

Before giving counsel to anyone, the wise pastor will first determine to which group and subgroup the person being counseled belongs because the counsel of God differs for each group. The commandments of God are always directed toward specific individuals or groups. If, for example, someone in Israel had assumed that God’s commandment to make incense for the altar was for everyone, they would have lost their lives (Ex. 30:22-38). That commandment was for the priests alone,

and not even all of them. Other commandments were only for Israel's judges; others, for every Israelite. It is of first importance, when considering the application of any of the commandments of God, to ascertain to whom God is speaking. Failure to do so could result in tragic consequences, as we have often seen in the misapplication of commandments related to marriage and divorce.

This is the unfortunate case with many who, upon reading Jesus' words in Matthew 19 concerning marriage and divorce, assume that the Lord's words apply to all marriages. The heartache and confusion this sort of error has caused is immeasurable. With each new tale of a home being divided, or of a young life being robbed of its joy by such bad counsel, my fervor to make known the truth of the matter grows. As young Elihu said, after waiting for some wisdom to be shown by the elders before him, I have waited in vain for someone among the leaders of God's people to speak out clearly on this matter, but I have not yet heard any of them do so.

Is this silence the result of ignorance? Or is it that the leaders of God's people feel it isn't wise to speak out plainly on the matter of marriage and divorce? Is my eagerness to get this message out the typical impatience of youth? Or is it with me as it was with young Elihu, when with burning frustration, he concluded, "*Great men are not always wise; neither do the aged understand judgment*" (Job 32:9)?

The pain that I have seen inflicted upon earnest and humble souls by well-intentioned but ill-informed ministers is great, and the availability of the truth that would set these damaged lives free is so scarce, that I am compelled by the love of God to provide this booklet of biblical truth concerning marital issues. My hope is that you will gain from these instructions a deeper appreciation of God's love and compassion for His hurting sons and daughters who find themselves in difficult marital situations.

Nowhere in the Bible does God give instruction to unbelievers concerning marital issues. The commandments of God are, without exception, given to those who believe. The standing commandment for sinners is simply to repent.

CHAPTER ONE

Unmarried Believers

A. If You Have Never Married

For you who have never married, God's instructions are simply to control the lusts of your flesh, keep yourself morally pure, and to marry if you desire to do so. For those among us who "have power over their own will" and are determined to remain single, permission – indeed, encouragement – is given to remain unmarried (1Cor. 7:7-9). But this is a choice which must be made in your own heart (1Cor. 7:37). God may call a man or woman to a celibate life, but it is a very rare calling. And religious leaders who impose celibacy on others are bluntly condemned by Paul, who associates such religious oppression with "doctrines of demons" (1Tim. 4:1-3).

Although you are permitted to marry, you must remember that you are to marry "only in the Lord" (1Cor. 7:39); that is, you may marry only someone else who believes in Christ. The prohibition of marriage to an unbeliever is one of the clearest and most consistent commandments for God's people found in Scripture, both in the Old Testament and the New:

You must not intermarry with them, neither giving your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor receiving their daughters for your sons. . . . For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God, the LORD your God having chosen you out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth to be a people of His very own. (Deut. 7:3,6)

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what is there in common between righteousness

and lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What harmony exists between Christ and Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God, as God said: "I will live and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

(2Cor. 6:14-16)

So, the prohibition of marriage between an unbeliever and a believer is an issue that has always been non-negotiable with the Almighty. This is one issue upon which every man who truly serves God will agree. Would to God that this warning were sounded from every housetop:

MARRIAGE TO AN UNBELIEVER IS SIN!

Another point of universal agreement should be God's demand that His unmarried children keep themselves morally pure. King David earnestly warned his young son Solomon (unfortunately, to no avail) to avoid entanglements with ungodly women. David's wise words to his son are ancient, but are as relevant as ever to young saints:

The commandment is a lamp, and the law is light; and the reproofs of instruction are the way of life, to keep you from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman. Lust not after her beauty in your heart, neither let her take you with her eyelids. For by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a piece of bread, and the adulteress will hunt for the precious life.

Let not your heart decline to her ways; go not astray in her paths, for she has cast down many wounded. Yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers [bedrooms] of death.

A foolish woman is clamorous. She is simple, and she knows nothing. For she sits at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, to

call passengers who go right on their ways. Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither. And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." But he does not know that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell. excerpts from Prov. 6, 7, 9

Keep yourself pure, dear friend. The penalties in God's kingdom for immorality are severe. Accordingly, the warnings against immorality are stern. Under God's Law, the death penalty was imposed for fornication (Deut. 22:20-21; cp. 1Cor. 6:9-10), adultery (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24), whoredom (Lev. 21:9; Eph. 5:5), rape (Deut. 22:25-27), incest (Lev. 18:6-18, 29; 20:11-12; Deut. 27:20, 22, 23), homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Deut. 23:17-18), and bestiality (Ex. 22:19; Lev. 20:15-16; 18:23; Deut. 27:21). Those who commit such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God. The Lord issued this famous exhortation to His people: "*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*" You should take that exhortation seriously. The salvation of your soul depends upon it.

As for the unmarried saints who wanted to marry, Paul advised them to consider the spiritual consequences of marriage. "*I want you to live without anxiety,*" he wrote. "*The unmarried man is concerned for things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord, but the man who has married is anxious about things of the world, how he may please the wife, and he is divided*" (1Cor. 7:32-33). And to the women he wrote, "*The unmarried woman cares for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit, but she that is married cares for the things of the world, how she may please her husband*" (1Cor. 7:34).

So, Paul rightly felt that an unmarried person is in a better position to give full attention to the work of the Lord than is a married person. However, Paul quickly and wisely lets the saints know that he is not commanding anyone either to marry or to remain unmarried. That is altogether a decision for the individual to make in his or her own heart.

Your liberty either to marry or not to marry is an unalienable privilege in Christ. As mentioned above, Paul prophesied of Christian ministers who would come, forbidding

some to marry (1Tim. 4:1-3). Such teachers, he said, are believers in Christ who “*depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons.*” Let no one pressure you either way, dear brother or sister. You are absolutely free to choose whatever you will, concerning marriage. The only restriction God places upon you is that if you decide to marry, you must marry another believer.

B. IF YOU ARE WIDOWED

Throughout the Bible, God shows great tenderness and concern for widows. He repeatedly commanded all Israelites to show compassion to the widows and orphans in Israel. One of the greatest indications of the righteousness of Job was that he “*caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy*” (Job 29:13).

In the main, the instructions for you who are widowed are the same as for those who have never married. You are permitted to remarry. The only exceptions concern who may marry the widow. Under the Old Testament, the priests of Israel were forbidden to marry a widow unless her previous husband had also been a priest (Ezek. 44:22). Only one person was absolutely forbidden to marry a widow: God’s high priest. He was required to marry a virgin from Israel (Lev. 21:14). These restrictions, however, were not for the widows. Widows were free to marry whom they would. The restrictions applied to the priests.

In one case, we find remarriage for a widow apparently discouraged, but it only appears that way. Careful consideration of that verse will show Paul was not forbidding a widow to marry. In 1Timothy 5, Paul is discussing the congregation’s care for widows. He states that the saints should support financially only those widows who were advanced in years and who had in the past consistently ministered to the needs of the saints. “*But the younger widows refuse, for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry, having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith.*”

With this, Paul is not saying that if a widow remarries, she has forsaken the faith. He is saying that if a young woman is “taken into the number” of those whom the congregation supports financially, she would have excess time on her hands

and, consequently, would be likely to fall into a pattern of living that would bring a reproach on the faith of Christ. That is, she would likely become *“idle, wandering about from house to house. And not only idle, but tattlers also and busy-bodies, speaking things they ought not.”*

So, contrary to what this verse at first may seem to teach, Paul was not saying that young widows must never remarry. In fact, he continues his discourse by saying, *“I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion for the adversary to speak reproachfully”* (1Tim. 5:13-14).

Paul would certainly have thought it good if a young widow found a godly man to marry. Can we deny that it was a good thing for Boaz to marry the widowed Moabitess named Ruth? Or did the widower Abraham sin after Sarah’s death by marrying Keturah? Or did the wise and righteous Abigail do wickedly by accepting David’s proposal of marriage after God had slain her evil husband Nabal? Time after time, the Bible provides us with examples of righteous widows remarrying, and of righteous people marrying them.

Just a little experience teaches us that typically, a young person who has tasted the benefits of married life has natural urges for companionship that are exceptionally strong. To those who diligently seek it, God gives grace to control the natural passions, but it is a great trial of faith for a previously married young person to keep himself or herself pure. Acknowledging this fact of life, Paul writes to the unmarried and to widows, *“It is good for them if, like me, they remain unmarried. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn [with desire]”* (1Cor. 7:8-9). Paul, then, permits and even desires that you who are widows and widowers remarry.

C. IF YOU WERE DIVORCED BEFORE YOUR CONVERSION

Generally speaking, if your divorce occurred prior to your conversion, then that divorce is just a part of your past sinful life which in Christ is done away with, and it is irrelevant now. So far as your liberty to marry another believer is concerned, the wise pastor will not even consider your previous marriage and

divorce. Any divorce, or ten of them, which took place when one was lost in sin is a dead issue, being part of the life of sin which is now repented of and washed away by the blood of Christ, never to be remembered against you again. Paul wrote (KJV), *“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, ALL THINGS are become new.”* When you were baptized with the Spirit into Christ, every part of your old life of sin was purged from your record by the precious blood of Christ.

Some will teach you that in Christ, all things are become new except your marital history. However, those people’s unwillingness to forgive a new convert’s previous marriage(s) is not a reflection of God’s mind. When a sinner comes to Jesus, he is given a new life – including a new past! Failures of the past are gone, completely and forever. Therefore, a sinner who had been washed from sin by the blood of Christ is free and is worthy to marry in the kingdom of God if he so desires.

This is why, even if you married and divorced a dozen times before being converted to Christ, you do not actually belong in the category of “divorced”, for you are indeed a “new creature”, with no error of the past on your record to obstruct your pursuit of a quiet and peaceable life in Christ – and with no marriage or divorce on your record in heaven!

It is tragic for some that certain men in authority among the saints think as they do about marriage and divorce. Consider the following scenario, which is representative of the way some ministers deal with the marital histories of new converts:

Some ministers would cheerfully allow a person to marry who lived a life of fornication before coming to Christ – if that person, while a sinner, had not married any of his fornication partners. On the other hand, a person who, while a sinner, had resisted fornication, and then married and divorced, would be forbidden to remarry. Do you see what an unjust judgment this is? The unbridled lust of one sinner is rewarded, while the other sinner’s effort to do right by marrying is punished.

This is not the way of the Lord.

In the early 1980's, near my hometown there lived a happy young couple with four children who were convicted of their sins and converted as members of an “Apostolic” congregation.

Not long after they were both born again, the pastor learned that she had been married previously while still a sinner. He informed them that they were living in adultery because she had a living husband and that they must separate. The young man, wanting to please God, moved onto a farm where he worked as a laborer, but it was a very difficult arrangement for everyone involved, parents and children.

The couple continued to attend the Apostolic church services which were also attending by a young man named John who had recently read a copy of this book. Upon learning the truth about marriage and divorce in the Kingdom of God, John went to visit Nate and told him that him and Latasha (not their real names) were not required to separate. Surprisingly, Nate argued against what John told him thinking that he was defending the faith of Christ. Seeing that he could not help Nate, John dropped the subject.

Latasha had to depend on public welfare, and Nate moved to New Jersey where he had relatives and where he hoped to find a job that would enable him to take better care of his family. While in New Jersey, Nate began attending meetings with another Pentecostal group. There he was taught that he and Latasha were not required to separate. Then Nate realized that Brother John had told him the truth, and not long afterwards, he returned to North Carolina to reunite with Latasha and the whole family then moved back to New Jersey to a happily married life.

Nate and Latasha's story, thankfully, had a happy ending. But that is not often the case.

CHAPTER TWO

Married Believers

A. IF YOU ARE MARRIED TO ANOTHER BELIEVER

Jesus said, “*What God has joined together, let no man put assunder*” (Mt. 19:6). What Jesus was saying in this verse is that if God puts a marriage together, no man has God’s permission to “put it asunder.” There are many couples “joined together” by ministers paid to perform a marriage ceremony, but this is not what Jesus meant by being joined together by God. A marriage joined together by God is a marriage that God approves of, and there are many marriages performed by ministers that do not have God’s approval.

Confidence that God has approved of a marriage will encourage both marriage partners through very difficult times and serve as an anchor for a marriage tossed about by the trials of this life. Paul warned those who were considering marriage that, even if their marriage was approved by God, they “*will have trouble in the flesh.*” Nevertheless, he added, “*If you marry, you have not sinned.*” There are many adjustments and compromises that will have to be made in order to have a happy marriage, regardless of how well matched a couple is. You should not fear that you have done something wrong by marrying who you marry just because you are going through a difficult time of adjustment. You need only follow God’s simple counsel for married believers in order to have a peaceful home.

Wives

Solomon said, “*Whoso finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor of the LORD*” (Prov. 18:22). A man with a wife

who trusts in Christ possesses great riches. “*Her price*”, wrote the wise man, “*is far above rubies.*” And he is a fool who fails to value such a wife very highly.

Paul wrote to the believing wives (Eph. 5:22-24),

Submit yourselves to your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the congregation, and he is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the congregation is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

Peter echoed this godly counsel when he wrote,

You wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, that if any obey not the word, they also without the word may be won by the conduct of the wives, while they behold your chaste conduct coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel, but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For this is the way, in the old time, the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands. Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him ‘sir’, whose daughters you are, as long as you do well.” 1Pet. 3:1-6

Simply put, the Lord expects his married daughters to behave themselves with humility, sobriety, and purity. The phrase, “trusting God” means, for you as a married believer, to rear your children in the fear and admonition of the Lord and to submit to your own husband “*as unto the Lord.*”

A wife who is belligerent and domineering is akin to a curse. “*It is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious and an angry woman,*” observed Solomon (Prov. 21:19). It is a fascinating insight into Solomon’s nature that he would compare a contentious woman to a continual, irritating

drip (Prov. 19:13; 27:15), something akin to what is often called the “Chinese water torture”. It is easy to see that Solomon, wise as he was, was the type of man who would be driven to distraction by a leaky faucet!

Agur, a prophet and a wise man, bluntly stated that quarrelsome wives are a plague to the earth itself (Prov. 30:23). It is good news for you believing wives that you need never resort to contentiousness, for the way for you to accomplish what is right is simply to do as your heavenly Father has commanded you to do. Otherwise, you will not accomplish good; you will only exacerbate whatever problems exist, as any number of frustrated wives can bear witness.

Husbands

To believing husbands, Paul wrote,

Love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Assembly of God and gave himself for it. Men ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. . . . Let every one of you so love his wife even as himself, and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

Eph. 5:25, 28, 33; cp. Col. 3:19

Peter gave these instructions to believing husbands:

You husbands, dwell with [your wives] according to knowledge, giving honor to the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, so that your prayers be not hindered.

1Pet. 3:7

So, the Lord demands more of his married sons than he does of his married daughters, for there is more humility and self-sacrifice required of the husband than of the wife, just as more self-sacrifice was required of Christ than of his followers. Simply to “submit yourselves” is easy, but to be required to give yourself as Christ gave himself is a demanding responsibility. “*To whom much is given, much is required,*” said Jesus. And though the husband’s appointed place as head of the family seems lofty, we should not lose sight of what is required of one

in that position. It is a position that requires a high degree of humility and devotion.

Is God a Romantic at Heart?

Fidelity to the marriage covenant is expected of both the husband and the wife. At times in ancient Israel, Israelite men infuriated the Lord by forsaking their Israelite wives for the more sensual heathen women. God felt very deeply the pain of betrayed wives in Israel, and He was vehement in his denunciation of their unfaithful husbands:

Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and has married the daughter of a strange god. The LORD will cut off the man who does this. Mal. 2:11-12a

Then, speaking of the many forsaken wives in Israel, God gives a heart-rending description of their tearful pleas to Him, adding a stern warning to the unfaithful husbands:

And this have you done again, covering my altar with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that He regards not the offering any more, or receives it at your hand. Yet you say, "Why?" Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously. Yet she is your companion, and the wife of your covenant. And did he not make one [in marriage] . . . so that He might seek a godly seed? Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none of you deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.

Mal. 2:13-15

God was insistent that women in Israel be cared for and treated honorably. If a man took one of his slave girls to wife, but later was displeased with her, he was forbidden to reduce her again to the status of a slave. If the man insisted that she leave his house, then she was allowed to be redeemed by her own

family. If he had betrothed her to his son, then from that time, “*he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters.*” If the man took a wife in addition to the former slave-girl, “*her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage [i.e. marital relations], he shall not diminish*” (Ex. 21:8-11). So, even a wife from the lowest stratum of Israel’s society was to be cared for and shown the respect due her honorable position as a wife.

But even more revealing of God’s love is God’s commandment concerning the treatment of young heathen women who were taken captive as spoils of war:

When you go forth to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God has delivered them into your hands, and you have taken them captive, and you see among the captives a beautiful woman and desire her, that you would have her for your wife, then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and pare her nails. And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in your house and bewail her father and her mother a full month. And after that, you shall go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be your wife.

And it shall be, if you have no delight in her, then you shall let her go wherever she will. But you shall not sell her at all for money. You shall not make merchandise of her, because you have humbled her.
Deut. 21:10-14

Is it not an indication of the compassion of God for the defeated, the downtrodden, and the helpless, that He would command His sons to allow a young Gentile woman time to recuperate from the trauma of war before taking her to his bedchamber? Does that not indicate a holy tenderness toward those who have never known God? I think it is particularly impressive that the time God required Israelites to give to those captives for mourning was the same amount of time that God gave Israel to mourn the death of Moses (Deut. 34:8). Pain is pain.

There are many biblical examples of God's care for and love for His married daughters in Israel. The modern notion that women were considered as nothing and were scorned, with God's approval, is a result of ignorance of the Scriptures. The Lord kept the hand of evil men back from their corrupt designs, demanding rest for slaves and animals at least one day in seven, demanding provision for the poor from everyone's fields, justice for the outcasts, even if they were from a foreign land, and honor and provisions to be given every wife, even if she came from the lowliest home or from a foreign land.

Moreover, God would not permit newlywed men in Israel to fight the battles of the Lord or to conduct any other business that would take him from his wife for at least one year after they married – not for the man's sake, but for the young woman's sake who had so recently been taken from her father's house to be his wife (Deut. 24:5). God is the best friend that new brides have ever had. Indeed, God's commandments concerning young married couples leave the impression that He is a romantic at heart.

“Marriage is honorable in all”, wrote the author of Hebrews. That is a reflection of God's heart towards marriage, for in the Bible, God has shown us how to honor and enjoy that sacred institution. May God grant us the grace to do as He directs.

There is no real controversy that I know of, concerning the conduct that God requires of His children who are married. Fidelity, purity, and charity are godly attributes never properly lacking in the life of a believer in Christ. The controversies concerning marriage and divorce – and there are many – center on issues related less to the issue of marriage itself than to the issues of divorce and remarriage.

B. If You Are Married to an Unbeliever

During his earthly ministry, Jesus never spoke to this situation. This is an extremely important point. What Jesus said about divorce and remarriage applied only to believers married to believers. So, when Paul gave instructions for believers married to unbelievers, he made it clear that *“I speak, not the Lord”* (1Cor. 7:12).

There are, according to Paul, two kinds of unbelieving spouses: the one who is “pleased to dwell” with you and the one who is not “pleased to dwell” with you. If the unbeliever is pleased to dwell with you, then you are not at liberty to leave (1Cor. 7:12-13). If the unbeliever is not pleased to dwell with you “and departs”, then you are at liberty to end the marriage (1Cor. 7:15-17). But Paul gave you a standard by which to determine whether or not your unbelieving spouse is really pleased to dwell with you. He said (1Cor. 7:14):

The [pleased-to-dwell-with] unbelieving husband is sanctified by the [believing] wife, and the [pleased-to-dwell-with] unbelieving wife is sanctified by the [believing] husband. Else were your children unclean. But now they are holy.

Now, we all know that God is the only one who can sanctify an unbeliever. No wife can sanctify her sinner husband, and no husband can sanctify his sinner wife. The point Paul is trying to make is that if your unbelieving spouse is truly “pleased to dwell” with you, he will at some point follow you into the kingdom of God. That is the only way given in the Scriptures by which you may judge whether or not your unbelieving spouse is truly “pleased to dwell with” you.

If the unbeliever follows you into sanctification, then he was indeed pleased to dwell with you. On the other hand, if he rejects sanctification, he is not pleased to dwell with you. The issue never gets any more complicated than that.

In the eastern part of North Carolina some years ago, a woman in a Pentecostal church was married to an unbelieving man. He was one of the filthiest, most immoral men in town, and the dear sister was constantly in despair over his lifestyle and the resulting shame and hurt for her and her children. Yet, when she sought direction from the church, she was told to ask her husband if he was pleased to dwell with her. And if he said “yes”, she was told, she would have to remain with him as his wife.

Of course, whenever she asked her wretched husband if he was pleased to dwell with her, he would say yes. So, dutifully, she stayed with the nasty whoremonger, bearing what she

thought was the burden of the Lord. Finally, her situation grew so desperately evil that, in spite of being condemned by the church, she left the man. Only when she was taught the truth was she relieved of the condemnation that Christians had heaped upon her aching heart.

In another case, in which I became personally involved, after the fact, Sister Louise (not her real name) was married to an abusive drunken unfaithful sinner. They had both been sinners when they married, but Louise had been converted. The Spirit was telling her all along that she was free to leave, but her pastor was telling her all along that she was responsible for sanctifying her husband. Louise tried with all that was within her to be a dutiful wife and a good mother to her two very small children but nothing she did had any good effect on him at all. If anything, he grew more evil in time.

Sometimes, when Louise was leaving to go to a prayer meeting her little girl would behave very badly, in Louise's judgment, but at least at those times her husband did help her calm the child down and encouraged her to go on out and attend the meeting. It was several years after Louise's husband drank himself to death one night, that she learned that her little girl had not been acting badly at all. The child's protests at her mother leaving her to go to a prayer meeting, she learned, were pleas for help, for the wicked man was molesting her when Louise was gone. If Louise had followed the Spirit instead of the instructions of her foolish pastor, her child may have escaped her father's cruel abuse.

Louise stopped attending services at that church when she discovered that her pastor, the man who had been advising her concerning her moral duty toward her husband, was himself being unfaithful to his wife. When I met her, she was one of the most wounded souls I have ever known, but she learned that the love of Jesus is greater than anything this world can inflict upon us. Still, how much better her life would have been if she had been taught the truth from the beginning.

The simple truth she learned was this: Paul did not tell the believing spouse that she must stay with her unbelieving spouse if he *says* he is pleased to dwell with you. That was not what Paul taught. He said you are to stay with your unbelieving

spouse if he *is* pleased to dwell with you. And then Paul explained how you could tell if your unbelieving spouse is pleased to live with you. Of course, a whoremongering husband will say that he is pleased to dwell with his godly wife. With her as his wife, he can go and do as he pleases and not worry about what she is doing in the meantime. Such wicked men too often work together with ignorant pastors to make a precious saint's life miserable.

I know of one situation in which a man brought a woman into his home to live, while his wife was living there, too – and still that believing wife was told by her pastor she had to stay with him! Such women need to be taught that God is not pleased for His daughters to live in such degrading conditions.

These are just some of the stories that I could tell. As I said in the beginning, there are few areas of life in which pastors themselves inflict more pain by ignorance of the truth than in the area of marriage and divorce.

“Bondage”

“If the unbelieving depart,” wrote Paul, *“let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such a case”* (1Cor. 7:15). The word “bondage” here, as in other places (i.e. 1Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:23), means “bound” in a legal sense; that is, not permitted by the law of God to marry another. So, what Paul is teaching is that if your unbelieving spouse leaves you, then you are free to pursue life as you will, either alone or with a mate in Christ. You are no longer bound by God to your marriage with that unbeliever.

The sole reason God would even want such a marriage to continue would be to save the unbeliever, anyway. If he does not value the mercy being shown to him, then let him go. I have heard the never-remarry-under-any-circumstance teachers interpret Paul's phrase, “not in bondage”, to mean that the believer may no longer be obligated to perform the ordinary duties of marriage, but he or she is still bound to that marriage and may never remarry. This is contrary to both Scripture and reason.

If “bondage” in Romans 7:2 means you are forbidden to marry another, as it clearly does, then “not under bondage” in

1Corinthians 7:15 must mean the opposite; that is, you are free to marry another. There is no reason for us to try to squeeze any other meaning out of that easily understood phrase.

But I want to give to the word “depart” a wider definition than the Reader may have in mind. I believe that if an unbelieving spouse gambles away the family’s money, he has departed. I believe that if the unbelieving spouse physically abuses the believer, he has departed. I believe that if the unbelieving spouse sexually abuses the children, he has departed. And I believe that if the unbelieving spouse commits any other crimes of equal seriousness, or breaks the vows upon which any legitimate marriage is founded, he has, in fact, departed. And *“if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such a case.”*

That said, let me re-emphasize the fact that you must give time to your unbelieving spouse, even if he acts badly to your godly lifestyle. If you both were sinners when you married, then you have become someone he did not marry, and that is not his fault. You must be patient. Any truly just person will, under such circumstances, give the unbeliever time to adjust.

Sometimes, the misbehaving spouse is not actually resisting the call of God. He is simply testing you to see if the change in you is genuine or if it is just a “phase” through which you are passing. God may give the unbeliever years to come to Him, especially if the believing spouse fails to be the faithful witness he or she should be. You must stay close enough to Jesus to be able to discern if and when your heavenly Father tells you it is time to move on.

But leaving is not ever the first option. And permission to leave the unbeliever will probably never be given if you fail to treat your unbelieving spouse with love and dignity. Your hope must be for your marriage to succeed, to the glory of God, and for your spouse to come to know the peace of Christ.

The instructions given to saints concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage work for our benefit only as we follow them in charity and good faith. God has called us to peace. *“So far as your part is concerned,”* Paul taught, *“live peaceably with all men.”* This commandment applies most of all to your relationship with your spouse.

As we have seen, the will of God concerning the moral conduct of His children is unquestionably clear. We need not belabor the point. The cloudiness comes when ignorant men lay burdens upon God's saints which are not of the Lord, "*thinking to do Him a service.*" Many believers are married to unbelievers today and are not being told the truth as to either their responsibilities or their options. As a result, many are ashamed to feel what they feel, to think what they think, and to do what, in many instances, the Spirit of the Lord is leading them to do. The truth about your marital responsibilities as a believer married to an unbeliever, and the knowledge of your options, will set you free to live happily, according to the will of your very good heavenly Father.

Marriage between a believer and unbeliever should never take place. If you are a child of God who has rebelled against the will of your heavenly Father and married an unbeliever, you have sinned. In some such cases, it could be that the only way to repent is simply to get out of the ungodly marriage, as God once forced certain Israelites to do after they rebelled against God's commandment to abstain from marrying Gentiles (Ezra 9, 10; Neh. 13:23-31). But only God can tell you if that is His will in your case.

C. Separation and Divorce Among Believers

If divorce involves two believers, remarriage is forbidden except under special circumstances. Reconciliation is possible; two separated believers do not have to remain separated. But in general, remarriage to others is not permitted to believers who divorce. They must remain single until death, or be reconciled to one another.

An Old Testament commandment helps us understand the mind of Christ in this matter. Under the Law of Moses, God forbade a man to marry his wife's sister while his wife was still living (Lev. 18:18). If he had married his wife's sister while his wife was living, it would have been considered incest. In this New Testament, if a believing man divorces a believing woman and then marries another believing woman, he would be doing precisely what Moses forbade Israelites to do. He would be marrying his wife's sister *in Christ*, thus causing unnecessary

conflict in the family of God. Moreover, if you, as a believing man, divorce your believing wife and marry another believer, not only have you committed incest with your living wife's sister in the Lord, you have committed adultery against your wife, thus giving her grounds upon which she may remarry.

The reconciliation of separated couples is permitted only if neither of them has married and divorced someone else during the separation (Deut. 24:1-4). God in no way endorses rotating marriage partners. The institution of marriage is a divinely ordained institution, and it should be entered into with all sincerity and commitment. Anything less than that is ungodly and unworthy of the blessing of Christ. In the world to come, marriage and reproduction will be forgotten experiences, "*for in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage*" (Mt. 22:30), but until then, marriage between believers is for life.

When Jesus spoke concerning marriage and divorce, he was referring only to marriage between two children of God. Jesus never spoke to the issue of a believer married to an unbeliever. Neither did he, nor Paul, nor any other biblical writer, ever give any instructions concerning marriage to sinners in the world at large. And even when Paul gave instructions for a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, he never spoke to the unbeliever. His instructions were written to the believer alone. And his instructions for saints married to sinners differed from his instructions for saints married to other saints.

When Paul wrote concerning believers married to one another, his instructions were identical to Jesus' instructions. In fact, Paul merely repeated the Master's words (1Cor. 7:10 with Mt. 19:3-9). He said, as Jesus did, that believers who divorce may never remarry.

But what, one may wonder, if one of the married believers abandons faith in Christ as well as abandoning his believing spouse? This may be a controversial stance to take, but I have come to believe that remaining faithful to the marriage covenant entails more than simply refraining from the physical act of adultery.

No one is more practical than God. In a sense, no one is more "down to earth" than Jesus. The Lord knows that there

will be cases when a believer “backslides” and departs from the faith, becoming in effect, an unbeliever again. Surely, God has made provision for the believer to divorce the fallen one and remarry. I cannot believe that the Lord requires any believer to endure endless abuse and degradation at the hands of a spouse who has cast off his faith and returned to the vomit of sin. If a believing husband sets his heart on the pleasures and possessions of this world and refuses to repent, his believing wife must be free to pursue eternal life alone or, if she desires, with another mate in Christ. Such a man is a reprobate, a reject of the kingdom of God (Tit. 3:10), and a faithful woman in Christ cannot be required to spend her life in loneliness because of her unfaithful husband’s apostasy.

This is not to suggest that if your spouse errs from the faith, you are given license to forsake him or her. The privilege, in certain extreme conditions, for you to remarry even if you are divorced from a believer should not be used as an excuse to give up on your spouse.

Divorce is not to be used as an escape from responsibility. The love of God forbids that. In all cases, as Paul noted, “*God has called us to peace.*” If your believing husband becomes slack in the faith, methods are given in the Scriptures for you to help the Lord win him again to the right way. Peter wrote to women who find themselves in such a case: “*You wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, so that if any obey not the word, they may without the word be won by the conduct of the wives, while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear*” (1Pet. 3:1-2).

Divorce is not the answer for a believing couple. Reconciliation, through patience and forgiveness, is. To both husbands and wives, and the whole Assembly of God, Peter continues by saying, “*Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous, not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing – on the contrary, blessing – knowing that you are called to do that, so that you should inherit a blessing*” (1Pet. 3:8-9). If we all do as Peter said to do, there will be no strife among us, and certainly no divorce.

So, if you are the spouse of a backslidden believer, you are required by the love of God to give the backslider time to see the error of his or her way. The only clearly stated exception to this rule is in cases of adultery. If your believing spouse commits adultery, you are at liberty to leave immediately if you choose to do so, and to remarry in the future, as you will.

Porneia

Whoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, commits adultery. (Mt. 19:9)

Fornication is sexual immorality committed before marriage. Adultery is unfaithfulness to one's marriage partner. Many ministers say that the Greek word used here for "fornication" (*porneia*) only refers to "fornication", and so, adultery is not mentioned by Jesus as acceptable grounds for divorce. They interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9 to mean that if you discover, after you have married, that your spouse was sexually active before marriage (= fornication), then, and only then, are you free to divorce and marry someone else.

Some of these teachers say that whoever a sinner first commits fornication with is the person to whom that sinner is forever married. I have heard of believers who have been told by such teachers to go find their first partner in fornication and marry them. However, if that first partner in fornication is unwilling to marry the believer who returns to him, then the poor believer is forever bound to loneliness. That is utter nonsense; it is not godly counsel.

Now, I agree that if you marry, and then discover that your mate was not truthful with you concerning pre-nuptial fornication, you have every right to dissolve the marriage. In ancient Israel, God even commanded the death penalty for such deception (Deut. 22:13-21). But to suggest that the Greek word in Matthew 19:9 refers only to fornication and that adultery is no grounds for divorce, is wrong.

First of all, the Greek word translated "fornication" in both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 (*porneia*) can refer to any manner of moral uncleanness. To quote from a world-renowned Greek-

English lexicon of the New Testament, this word, *porneia*, refers to “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.”

Secondly, Jesus sent us the Spirit to guide us into all truth so that we would know better than to force a woman to stay with a man who is an adulterer. Have we no more common sense or knowledge of God than that? If one argues that the Scriptures are unclear at this point, let me argue that the Spirit is not.

Summary

Believers married to believers are permitted to separate and divorce, but if they divorce for any reasons other than infidelity to the marriage vows, they may not marry another (however, they may be reconciled to each other). The only possible exception to this rigid rule is if one of the believers in a marriage becomes unfaithful to Christ and stubbornly refuses, over a period of time, to turn from his or her wickedness. The suffering spouse will, at some point, be free to continue in the faith as he or she will, either alone or with another mate in Christ. There is no scripturally prescribed “time limit” for patience on the part of the suffering spouse; therefore, only by knowing the Spirit of God can you know when your wayward spouse has rejected God’s last call.

In cases of gross moral uncleanness, whether physical, emotional, or mental, an abused believer is free to divorce immediately, with liberty to remarry. He or she is also free to decide to forgive the repentant spouse and stay in the marriage. It is altogether the choice of the offended spouse.

Conclusion

Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his time for heaping burdensome doctrines on the backs of God's people (Lk. 11:46). This happens now, every time a false message is delivered to a child of God, burdening his life with commandments of men in the guise of divine doctrine. Always remember that, unlike many of the commandments of men, God's "*commandments are not grievous*" (1Jn. 5:3).

To those who are trying to serve God while bearing the burden of the teachings of men, Jesus is still calling, with great compassion, "*Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

Jesus will give you rest from confusion, loneliness, and fear. He will lift from your weary back the heaviness of not knowing the will of God for your life. When that sweet relief comes, you will know that God is, indeed, good. God is, and always has been, more compassionate than men know. And I can think of no way in which the disparity between the mercy and reasonableness of God is more clearly distinguished from the harshness and blindness of men than by comparing what the Scriptures teach concerning marriage and divorce to what some ministers teach.

There will always be people in situations not exactly dealt with in the Bible, but Jesus suffered and died to make the Spirit available, to help us make right decisions. The Spirit, Jesus promised his disciples, "*will guide you into all truth,*" and that is our only hope of always doing what is truly good.

Paul certainly made judgments about situations not dealt with anywhere in the Bible, and he did that by knowing the Spirit. That is the kind of connection with God that we all need. "*The Spirit is life,*" wrote Paul, and none of us can live rightly without it. When there is no specific biblical commandment given, the Spirit reveals the will of God to us so that we will not transgress against Him ignorantly.

So, be of good cheer. Whatever situation you are in, whether specifically dealt with in the Scriptures or not, Jesus has an answer for you that will relieve you of your burden and give you hope. In the love of God, there are no dead ends.

A final note from the author:

Who does God say is a believer?

If one is ignorant of the truth concerning when a person is born of the Spirit, how can he judge whether he is married to a believer or not? Or how can one even know whether or not he himself is born again? No issue concerning eternal life can be “rightly divided” unless the truth concerning the new birth is understood. We must know who is in the body of Christ and who is not, for if we do not know who belongs to God, we cannot know which instructions belong to whom.

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