

Let's Talk About It

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Why So Many Divorces?

After working with so many couples over the years as a marriage and family therapist, I can list many problems in marriage that lead to divorce. These may include infidelity, abuse, neglect, poor communication, homosexuality, poor financial management, in-laws, sexual impotency, poor physical health, alcohol and drug usage, and "irreconcilable differences." When allowed to fester, these problems bring pain in a relationship, leading to an eventual divorce. Are these problems fixable? Are these really the reasons people get divorced.

UNDERLYING REASONS

Renowned writer and evangelist, Luis Palau, presents these problems in a more philosophical way in his article "Five Underlying Reasons for Divorce." Here are the reasons he gives:

1) **Unreasonable expectations.** Couples expect completely unrealistic things from marriage. In a word, they want total fulfillment. They expect marriage to meet all their sexual, emotional, and personal needs and desires. Of course, such expectations eventually lead to disaster.

2) **Ungodly focus.** Palau says: "A marriage is in danger whenever the partners maintain a wrong center of focus. Some focus on their spouses, others devote themselves to their children, and many simply concentrate on themselves. The only truly satisfying focus, however, is Jesus Christ."

3) **Uncontrolled passions.** "One of our most uncontrolled passions is spending. We have bought into the materialistic philosophy that says, "Get more out of life." So we spend our lives trying to accumulate things, often to the neglect of our marriages. Another uncontrolled passion is sensualism. We are made callous by the immorality we see in print, on television, and in movies."

4) **Unforgiving attitudes.** Palau explains: "We're all weak. We all fail. Our marriages stand or fall depending on how we respond to our spouses' shortcomings."

5) **Unbiblical presuppositions** "Scripture, interestingly enough, connects marriage and sexual intimacy with the most sacred relationship of all – our spiritual unity with Jesus Christ. Marriage is an incredible metaphor of what it means to be right with God. No wonder Scripture places such a high premium on faithfulness and lifelong commitment within marriage."

We all can agree, Christian or non-Christian, that Luis Palau is right. These are some of the underlying reasons for divorce. If couples have the right approach toward marriage and deal with their present difficulties, divorce can be avoided. But once again, is it that simple?

MARITAL SATISFACTION SPAWNS DIVORCE

To further complicate matters, I came across a longitudinal study by a university sociology graduate that looks at the reasons behind divorce. Anne Marengo's study looked at this issue by

examining a survey from the second and third generation of respondents over a period of 30 years. This sociology student looked at what triggered divorce in couples who are facing marital dissatisfaction. Here are her findings. The study revealed “that a higher education level often increases the chance of divorce between a couple not happy with their relationship. Such factors as the increased number of women with higher education levels, more women entering the work force and wages that are nearly equal between men and women, play an important role.” “What is even more surprising,” states Marengo, “is the discovery that those who are more religious and attend church regularly are more likely to divorce when they are less satisfied with their marriage.”

The report also showed that conflicting personal beliefs play a significant role when unhappy couples divorce. Marengo found that individuals who believe in a more traditional marriage relationship are more likely to divorce when their partner believes in a more contemporary marriage. The difference in opinions could lead to the couple becoming dissatisfied with their own marriage.

The final point from the report was that the more children a couple has, the higher the likelihood of divorce. With the addition of children, what began as a two-way relationship becomes a six-way relationship when only two children are added. The more children included, the more complicated a couple’s life becomes.

MY OBSERVATIONS

As a counseling psychologist who works with relationships daily, I have to help couples and individuals work through these problems and many more. I’ve come to the conclusion, though, that divorce in the majority of cases (90 percent) is avoidable. This brings me to my findings why people get divorced. The real reason for divorce is not the presence of a particular problem in a relationship, but the refusal for one or both partners to cooperate and work together to bring healing. Here is what I have observed are the fundamental reasons for at least 90 percent of divorces today. 1) **Traditionalism**. I’ve discovered that no matter how simple or complicated the problem might be, one of the toughest roadblocks is when a partner refuses to examine her traditional way of doing things, thus causing a stalemate on progress towards healing. For example, when a husband refuses to give more affection to his wife even when she tearfully begs him to do so. 2) **Selfishness**. Hurting spouses can become very narcissistic. Everything must be for their benefit and no one else. Their thinking process is blocked by their personal pain and selfishness diminishing wise judgement. 3) **Stubbornness and Pride**. Sometimes a hurting partner refuses to change, open his mind, come to counseling session, admit her part in the weakening of the relationship. He is just stubborn and proud. She refuses to eat a slice of the humble pie. What can the other partner do, but divorce the uncooperative spouse? I’ve observed that these are the real reasons for divorce, not the specific problems.

LOST COIN SYNDROME

I can best explain my observations by referring to the lost coin parable found in John 15. The lost coin is the shortest of the three parables in the chapter. However, it presents the greatest dilemma of all. Let me explain. This life application of the three parables is not a theological explanation of the passage.

The lost sheep did not plan to get lost. It wandered away unknowingly but finally realized it was lost and cried for help. This parable represents those couples who are willing to get help and find healing within reach.

The lost son in Luke 15 made a decision to get lost. From the beginning he knew he was lost, although he thought he could rough it out on his own. However, he finally called for help and found personal healing. This parable also represents those couples who are having a great difficult time in marriage, but after much prayer, coaching, and counseling, they finally find peace and healing.

The lost coin did not know it was lost and did not cry for help. This parable represents those partners in relationships who refuse to admit they are wrong, or who act like they "know it all," and who hold on to tradition even when it is breaking the marriage apart. They are unteachable. Sometimes, it is only through a serious tragedy or loss in their lives that individuals may come to their senses, and often it's too late. I call this the lost coin syndrome.

My observations is that the lost coin represents about 90 percent of the divorces today; that is, when one party just refuses to change, admit her wrong, and eat a slice of humble pie. This is what makes divorce inevitable: Traditionalism, selfishness, stubbornness, and pride.

GET ON YOUR KNEES

Then it is obvious, if hurting couples would sit at the table of humility and swallow their pride, at least 90 percent of all potential divorces could be avoided. If wounded couples would allow the warmth from a loving and caring Jesus to melt their ice cold hearts, healing would be possible. I've also observed in sessions that even when a spouse who did not "cause the problem" refuses to work alone with the one who did cause the pain, couple healing is impossible. The one who did not cause the pain would say, "that's your problem not mine." When there is pain in a relationship caused by one or both partners, healing can only take place if both get on their knees and seek forgiveness.