

Burdened By Divorce

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Why are so many Christians burdened by the decision to divorce, especially when their marriages are so painful and destructive? Is it because of what many think Jesus meant in Matthew 5:31-32 when he said to divorce "only if there is sexual unfaithfulness?" Is it also because many are ignorant of the cultural and historical setting during Jesus' time and have difficulty making current applications? Or is it because we have been schooled by theologians who themselves either have biases or were wrongfully taught. Read this article with an open mind as I seek to unpeel the topic that is causing much misunderstanding and havoc in many lives. You will discover that my view is that the traditional interpretation and application of Jesus' statement in Matthew about divorce is grossly inaccurate.

There is a poignant text about divorce found in Malachi 2:16. It states: " 'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' said the Lord Almighty." I can hear many saying in response to that text. "See, you must never get divorced."

It is true, God does hate divorce, but He also hates violence in marriage. Truly divorce is not "right," neither can we say it is always wrong. Malachi 2:16 states: " 'I hate divorce,' says the Lord God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' said the Lord Almighty." Often a spouse trapped in an abusive marriage finds it hard to escape because friends and relatives would say that she must stay because divorce is wrong. This is unfortunate. I feel that adultery as well as cruelty in marriage break the marriage vow. The marriage vow not only includes sexual fidelity, but cherishing and meeting each other's needs.

Marriage is a lifetime covenant before God that should never be severed by human actions. However, because of evil in the hearts of many, divorce is often inevitable. The oneness of marriage is not only spiritual but also biological. Research has shown that married couples develop chemical exchanges as a result of sexual intimacy. Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul stresses the importance of sexual fidelity in marriage. Sex is truly the cement that bonds couples. No wonder Paul said that when you lie with a prostitute you become one with her. "God's perfect will is the preservation of society and future generations by the preservation of marriage."

Yet, marriage is intended to be permanent. However, it is not my view that the Bible is saying that the only reasons a person can divorce are (1) on "grounds of adultery/sexual unfaithfulness" (Matthew 5:32)" or (2) on "grounds of abandonment" (1 Corinthians 7:15). *(Many churches believe that adultery is the only grounds for divorce).*

It is my view that this long held belief really does an injustice to the understanding of the mercy and grace of Jesus. It is my belief that it is a gross misunderstanding of what Jesus meant and what he was dealing with at the time. This rigid understanding and practice results in the church and its leaders re-victimizing those who are in painful marriages--men or women.

Many spouses who are "forced" by their own beliefs, or that of their church or family, to stay in a terrible marriage *(because they did not commit adultery)*, end up being emotionally or

psychologically damaged for life. Their children are also wounded. In addition, many become physically ill, even to the point of dying. I know of a few wives who were killed by their abusive partners because they were forced to stay in a painful, abusive marriage. Their own system of beliefs and those around them trapped them in a hopeless prison of turmoil and pain.

In principle, I must point out that I do not believe in frivolous divorce or no-fault divorce. In the United States of America, "When the marriage partners mutually agree that they no longer feel the marriage is worth continuing, a no-fault divorce will allow the couple to obtain a divorce easily (Wikipedia)." In some countries it is called "divorce by mutual consent". In principle, there is no ground for divorce on the basis of lack of love, incompatibility, loss of interest, inability to have children, or opposing careers.

Must an individual, hurting in a relationship, just sit idly when love dies or differences seem so insurmountable? No. However, to make the marriage work, there must be a commitment by both parties to bring change in the relationship and to take steps towards healing. When only one partner feels the pain and the other thinks all is well, this makes it very difficult to remain in the marriage.

Cultural Context of Jesus' Response

Let's get deeper. Matthew 5:31-32 is the Bible text that is at the foundation of the rigid and condemning approach to divorce itself, the divorce procedures, or divorced individuals -:

31 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

It is imperative to understand the culture and times in which Jesus was speaking. Here are a few things to ponder about women during Jesus' time.

Simply put, under the law and tradition, women had no voice, vote, power, access, opportunity, nor protection. In modern terms, neither could they own property or have a bank account. Here is an interesting quote from the article "Is adultery the only reason for divorce? Are other reasons permitted?" written by James M. Rochford:

"Only men could divorce women—not the other way around. However, a woman could plead before a court of rabbis, and the rabbinical court could persuade the husband to divorce his wife. This was based on the man issuing the certificate of divorce—not the woman (Deut. 24:1). According to Josephus, Jewish men could divorce their wives, but wives could not divorce their husbands. Josephus writes, "[A wife sent a] bill of divorce, and dissolved her marriage with him, though this was not according to the Jewish laws; for with us it is lawful for a husband to do so; but a wife, if she departs from her husband, cannot of herself be married to another, unless her former husband put her away." However, Jesus does address the concept of a wife divorcing her husband (Mk. 10:12)."

Dr. John Temple Bristow in his book "What the Bible Really Says about Love, Marriage and Family" page 111, writes this about the times of Jesus:

"Judean divorce practices were particularly unfair to wives. A woman who was divorced had only four options:

1. She might live for some time on her dowry (providing that her husband had not manage to keep it, something that was often permitted);
2. She might return to her parents' home (if they were still living and were able to take her in) or live with some other relatives (if they would receive her);
3. She might hope for and seek out a new husband (difficult for a woman to do in that culture);
4. She might support herself through prostitution."

In summary the cultural context prevailing during Jesus' pronouncement included:

1. Women were of no value politically, educationally, or socially.
2. Women could not be sued or sue because they were *persona non grata*.
3. Women could not own property.
4. Women could not go to school.
5. Women could not vote. They had no political voice.
6. Women could not divorce their husbands because they had no power or right to do so. Only husbands could divorce their wives. The process of divorce was totally in the hands of men.
7. Women were considered "property" of their husbands, like animals who were under total control of the "masters," their husbands..
8. Women were treated like animals who were being tied up in the back of the yard, under total control of the "masters," their husbands.
9. Only husbands could divorce their wives.
10. The process of divorce was totally in the hands of men.
11. A husband could divorce his wife on trivial grounds like causing the pot of food on the stove to be burnt. All he had to do was to give her a piece of paper stating she was divorced from him. There was no court system or regulatory body needed to "approve" the divorce.
12. Women could have been divorced against their will.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question pointedly addressed the difficulties faced by divorced women in that time and in that culture. If a man chose to divorce his wife in order to marry another woman, Jesus' teachings imply, his actions may have been legal, but they also may have been unjust and cruel. This fact is reflected in Jesus' unusual wording about divorce earlier in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:31-32."

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Did you note the limited and restrictive options the wives had during the time of Jesus? Jesus was really stating that, based on expectation and practice, a divorced woman could be unfairly forced into prostitution to make a living if the others options were not available . Jesus was saying, this is not to be done. Even when there were other options she would be kept in a dependent state.

Understand that a woman could be divorced for unreasonable, frivolous reasons, and she had no authority to do the same to her husband. . Jesus' main point was about compassionate, fair treatment of wives while they are married. They were not chattel.

All that being stated, I believe that it is wrong to interpret Matthew 5:31-32 to mean that Jesus is stating that adultery or sexual unfaithfulness is the only grounds for divorce. It is my view that Jesus was stating that marriage is serious and sacred business, and it is intended to be permanent. It is unfortunate that many take their marriage vows so lightly.

I believe that the emphasis of Jesu's reply rested on his message that a woman is not to be divorced for stupid, frivolous reasons. Thus, He was pointing out that reasonable grounds on which a husband can divorce his wife would be as a result of something **like** (*not the results of*) sexual unfaithfulness--something very serious.

It is my view that the Bible is not teaching about **grounds for divorce** but rather about the "**grounds**" **not to divorce**--frivolous reasons. The Bible is teaching about the sacredness of marriage and that women are of equal value with men.

It is my view that Jesus was not giving an injunction against divorce but a liberation of the oppressed. He demonstrated that marriage is to be a loving relationship. Isn't it interesting that although Jesus was addressing the topic and traditional practice of men divorcing their wives, the text is used today to apply to both men and women.

Here is a key point stated by James M. Rochford: "The religious leaders were trying to get Jesus to side with one rabbinical school or the other. Instead, **Jesus took a radically different position, defending the rights of women and the sanctity of marriage.**"

During my years as a marriage and family therapist, I have seen that there are many other serious reasons people get divorced. The constant, painful emotional abuse by one partner to another, is a common reason for divorce. The abandonment and rejection of one partner also leaves the spouse with serious feelings of worthlessness, depression, etc. What must a spouse do in these circumstances? Must they just sit and boil indefinitely in the pot of neglect, coldness, and constant abuse? I refuse to believe that a loving Jesus would "require" the partner to stay because there is no sexual unfaithfulness. Some spouses become seriously physically ill because they have to "stay" in such relationships. High blood pressure, diabetes, heart problems, etc, are difficult to resolve while living in a mean and emotionally rude environment.

SOME REASONS WHY PEOPLE DIVORCE

Although some might argue that there is no grounds for divorce other than adultery, one must not judge someone who is in marital difficulty. Each case must be dealt with individually and objectively.

Writing from a vantage point of many years of marital counselling, It is my belief that most divorces are preventable. Many divorces are the result of premature marriages or other high-risk behaviors before marriage. For examples:

(1) Many couples rush from first-acquaintance to "will you marry me" too quickly, thus creating a premature entrance into marriage. These rush, rush, marriages are high-risk factors for divorce.

(2) Many couples live together before marriage, jumping the steps for proper relationship bonding, thus increasing the risk for marital breakups. To put it bluntly, I have discovered in my counseling practice, through just an observance of human development, that more than 80 percent of the couples who have divorced, have lived together before marriage and/or engaged in premarital sex.

(3) Sometimes one of the partners in the relationship has not been open and honest with the other about being promiscuous or using drugs before marriage.

To understand further the reason people divorce, read my article entitled "[Humility, Love, Pride and the Nagging Good Wife.](#)"

Again, here is why understanding this is so important. There are many Christians, due to their rigid interpretation of Jesus and divorce, who treat divorce as the unpardonable sin. Thus, far too many divorced Christians are laden with guilt and shame. This was not Jesus' intent. Jesus' teaching was liberating to women.

LIVING TOGETHER AND HAVING SEX EXPLAINED

Here's what I have observed in my private practice. Couples who live together very early in the relationship, long before they know each other, tend to have more problems in the relationship than those who move in after engagement or just a few months before marriage. I have also observed that couples who engage in premarital sex very early in the relationship and before they really know each other, tend to have greater problems in the relationship and during marriage. Pre-married couples who have sex as a normal part of their daily or weekly menu tend to have more difficulty during courtship and after marriage. Why? Usually one or both of them, after giving themselves sexually, find it difficult to end a bad relationship because they feel they have given so much of themselves. On the other hand, I have observed that couples who waited or had sex once for a few time just before marriage (*It is not a regular part of the menu.*) and after making a life-long commitment to each other, tend to have less problems after marriage. My point is this. Premarital sex destroys objectivity in the relationship.

There are also high-risk behaviors after marriage that unfortunately sometimes lead to divorce. For examples: (1) One partner may feel that he or she has a right to do anything he or she wants to do outside of the relationship without the other questioning it. It may be coming home at any hour of the night. It may be taking social trips abroad with someone of the opposite sex. It may be spending more time socializing with friends than with family. (2) One partner may continue to keep the sentimental attachments with a former romantic partner(s) sometimes sharing family secrets, or spending long hours on the phone discussing personal matters that should be kept between husband and wife. It may also be showing a more caring attitude to a person other than one's spouse. The goal is to avoid high-risk behaviors before and after marriage that can lead to divorce.

LEGAL CHALLENGES

In The Bahamas and other countries, the legal reasons for divorce are lacking, in that persons are almost forced to remain in a terrible relationship. For example, the legal grounds for divorce in The Bahamas are ([See Statistics](#)):

1. Adultery
2. Cruelty
3. Desertion for two years (has deserted the petitioner for a continuous period of at least two years)
4. Separation for five years (living separate and apart)
5. Homosexuality & Bestiality. (Since the celebration of the marriage been guilty of a homosexual act, sodomy or has had sexual relations with an animal)

Note, there is no legal grounds for divorce on irreconcilable or irrevocable differences. There are often profoundly serious reasons for divorce other than those mentioned in the Divorce Act. I have known of individuals who could not leave the marriage because there were no "grounds" to divorce. This is a re-victimization of the one in pain. The two years of desertion or five years of separation needed to get a divorce proves in many cases to be far more debilitating than leaving for "no reasons." But if the person leaves, there might be legal ramifications that can make it difficult for the victim.

REMARRIAGE

At a future date, I will seek to expound on the topic of remarriage. However, many of you can rightly deduce that, based on my views of divorce, any individual is free to remarry after a divorce. It is my view that a person is spiritually and legally free to remarry. However, many are truly not emotionally or psychologically free to remarry. Okay, some would argue that if one is not emotionally free to marry then one is not spiritually free to marry. What is most important to understand is that far too many Christians are seriously torn between their natural needs, feelings and desires and their ingrained, misguided views about divorce. It is a cognitive dissonance.

CONCLUSION

Remember, divorce prevention or reducing divorce-risk activity is much easier than divorce recovery. Divorce prevention is painless. Divorce recovery is painful. Divorce prevention is exciting and adventurous. Divorce recovery is stressful, and physically and emotionally exhausting. Divorce prevention enhances self-worth. Divorce recovery can wither self-esteem. If you are not married as yet, then take heed. If you are married and there is high-risk behavior in your marriage that may lead to divorce, remember to do all you can to be honest and truthful to each other. Commit to rekindling the fire of marriage first before you decide on divorce.