

Divorce and Remarriage

Essential Beliefs about Divorce

It's great to talk about marriage, but we also have to discuss the unpleasant reality of divorce (actually what you think about divorce says a lot about what you really think about marriage). Divorce is far more common among Christians than it should be (some polls even suggest it happens more often among self-proclaimed Christians than others--yikes). Maybe part of the reason for this is we don't talk about it enough and we've absorbed our culture's view that divorce is a routine and morally neutral way of dealing with pain in a marriage.

Before we wade into the water on this: if you are divorced and/or remarried, we want to make sure we're very clear up front that God loves you no matter what the details are of your divorce and/or remarriage! We want to love you and accept you too. If you are seeking help to work through your questions or emotions about a divorce please let us know so we can come alongside you: Contact Pastor Jeff Bailey, Pastor of Care and Counselling, at 630.585.7777 or by e-mail at jbailey@crossroadsconnect.net.

This is treacherous territory, so "buckle up" and bear with us as we explain what the Bible teaches:

1. Divorce needs to be considered from both a legal point of view and from God's point of view. A legal divorce is the termination of marital rights and privileges. All divorces that God will recognize as the end of a marriage must be done according to the law; in other words, **if you have not been legally divorced, you are still married both in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of God**. This is an exact parallel to marriage; marriages that God recognizes are legal marriages; in the case of divorce the Bible itself even refers to the legal concept of using a "certificate of divorce" (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4). **However it doesn't always work the other way around; not all divorces done in the eyes of the law are recognized by God as the end of the marriage** (in other words, two people can be legally divorced but still married in God's eyes). See point #3 below.
2. **God created marriage but divorce is man's idea**. Jesus said, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6). **Therefore, we can say with certainty that a divorce is never God's will** and we should never kid ourselves by saying "God wants me to get a divorce." His will is always repentance, healing, reconciliation and rebuilding.
3. While divorce is never God's will, **there are certain circumstances in which the Bible teaches that God will permit a husband or wife to be released from his or her marriage covenant** (more on that in a moment). But don't confuse acceptance with approval; God's permission is intended to give the divorced Christian freedom in the future even though He doesn't like what is happening right now.
4. When God permits divorce, it means He is recognizing the [legal] divorce as the end of the marriage; of course, this also means that **where God does not permit divorce, He does not recognize the end of the marriage at that point**. Now we can understand #1 above a little better: **two people who are legally divorced will still be considered by God as married if they divorced for reasons He does not permit**. We take this from Jesus' words about divorce as recorded in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9 where He says that remarriage after a divorce that is not acceptable results in the moral sin of adultery. There could be no adultery unless the original marriage was still "in effect" from God's point of view.
5. **Divorce, even for reasons God does not recognize, is not an "unforgiveable sin."** This means that divorced Christians can restore their relationship with God the same way any other Christian who sins any other kind of sin can: through confession and repentance. Unfortunately, sometimes Christians treat Christian brothers or sisters who've been divorced as if they have some kind of permanent moral disfigurement. This is completely unbiblical and at Crossroads, we don't want any divorced person to feel that kind of judgment.

6. What about remarriage after divorce? Well, from the foundation we've already laid, it follows that **where the divorce was permitted by God, then remarriage is permitted by God**. This goes hand-in-hand with #4 above. The other situation in which remarriage is perfectly okay is following the death of a spouse, which also ends the marriage in God's eyes (see 1 Corinthians 7:39). We also follow the clear biblical teaching that Christians should only marry other Christians (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14).
7. This still leaves a remaining dilemma: **what if I am divorced for a reason God does not recognize, but have already remarried?** From God's point of view am I still somehow married to my former spouse, and my new marriage isn't really valid? The key here is to see that your remarriage – **even if it was not approved of by God because of the circumstances of your divorce – did in fact end your prior marriage from God's perspective**. Were this not true, then God would be putting you in "double jeopardy:" every act of sexual union in the new marriage would be an act of adultery against your prior spouse, yet at the same time God would be commanding you to remain in this "adulterous marriage" because "...what God has joined, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6) and because the Bible never explicitly permits ending the second marriage by divorce in this circumstance. This is given further support by Deuteronomy 24:4 where God tells us it would be "detestable" (i.e. repulsive, obscene) for a man to remarry a former wife who had herself since remarried and then been divorced again (or become a widow by her second husband's death). By remarriage, the first marriage is spiritually ended and must never be resumed.

What are the circumstances in which God permits divorce for a Christian?

This is the million-dollar question! Theologians and Bible experts have wrestled with this issue for centuries. Here is where we stand:

1. Based on Mathew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, **a husband or wife is permitted (but not required) to divorce when his or her spouse has violated the intimacy of the marriage by being sexually unfaithful**. We define sexual unfaithfulness more specifically (based on our understanding of the Greek used in the original biblical texts) to be **any act of physical sexual union other than with your spouse**. It is the "union" that is so crucial to God because the exclusive sexual union with your spouse is at the core of the definition of marriage itself (Genesis 2:24). We acknowledge that this excludes other types of sexual sin that do not involve physical union with another (e.g. sexual lust, the use of pornography, etc.) that can nonetheless be tremendously painful to the affected spouse. While such sins are serious and absolutely have consequences for marital intimacy, we believe they are biblically equivalent to other serious non-sexual sins that can likewise be devastating to a marriage (e.g. lying, unrighteous anger, substance abuse, financial irresponsibility, etc.) but for which no option of divorce is provided.
2. Based on 1 Corinthians 7:15, **divorce is permitted when it is initiated by a spouse who is not a Christian**; the specific reason for the divorce is irrelevant.
3. Based on Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 7:15, **a Christian may divorce his or her spouse if (a) they have effectively abandoned the marriage through on-going physical separation, neglect, or emotional or physical abuse; and (b) they have been confronted with their sin (according to the process outlined in Matthew 18:17) and given an opportunity to repent and seek help as needed, yet refuse to do so**. Our position here is based on combining two ideas; the first comes from Matthew 18:17 where we learn that a Christian who repeatedly refuses to acknowledge sin after going through several rounds of confrontation is to be treated as if he or she were a non-Christian and we are free to disassociate with such a person. We apply this to 1 Corinthians 7:15 to conclude that this unrepentant spouse is, by his or her refusal to change, doing the equivalent of choosing to "leave" the marriage—i.e. the spouse has no interest in making it a real marriage characterized by mutual love and respect. We are therefore free to treat this spouse as a non-Christian who wants a divorce even though he or she isn't literally and legally initiating it.

Whew! That is a lot to digest and we know it can be confusing. We also know that every situation relating to divorce (and/or remarriage) is unique and intensely personal. Our desire at Crossroads is to offer God's love and wise counsel to anyone considering divorce, going through one, or dealing with its effects.