

DIVORCE OR REMARRIAGE ARE NEVER ALLOWED?**MATTHEW 19:3-9**

All of us have heard the dismal statistics. Approximately one half of all marriages end in divorce. An even higher percentage of second and third marriages end in divorce. True, those statistics have been challenged by other researchers as being too high or too negative, but everyone agrees divorce statistics are too high. Have you ever heard of “starter marriages”? Getting divorced before the age of 30 has become so common in our society that it’s created its own demographic group. A “starter marriage” lasts a few years and usually ends before children arrive. One government survey says 20% of divorces in first marriages now occur within five years. Sociologists say our culture has developed another relationship pattern they refer to as “serial monogamy.” That’s when one person is married to another person, but over the course of his or her lifetime, he or she will have several consecutive marriage partners. Of course, it’s also well-known that cohabitation – living together before marriage or without ever getting married at all – has become an increasingly popular lifestyle choice. Perhaps part of the reason is to avoid the pain of divorce. But even some non-Christian psychologists and sociologists have discovered a whole host of very negative consequences associated with cohabitation.

Today, I’m concluding a series of messages on several hard sayings by Jesus found in the New Testament. They’re hard either because they’re difficult to understand, difficult to accept, or both. They challenge us, disturb us, and make us question some of our assumptions about Jesus and what He taught. So, today, we consider the thorny issue of divorce and remarriage. As He did on many other occasions, Jesus said something pretty provocative that shocked people back then and still grabs our attention today. Let’s read it just now. Did Jesus really mean divorce or remarriage are never allowed for His followers? I daresay divorce and remarriage is an issue that’s impacted the majority of us here today personally. Many of us here today have gone through a divorce and remarriage. Others have had people very close to us in life – a parent, an adult child, a sibling, a close friend – experience divorce and remarriage.

You probably already know what Christians believe the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage is all over the map. Here’s just a limited sample of viewpoints. First, some say the Bible teaches that neither divorce nor remarriage is ever allowed for any reason. Second, some say the Bible allows divorce for limited reasons such as adultery and desertion, but never remarriage. A third group is convinced the Bible allows divorce for those two reasons – adultery and desertion – and that remarriage is OK for the spouse who didn’t commit adultery or desertion. A fourth group believe the Bible permits divorce and remarriage for a limited number of reasons – more than just adultery and desertion – but it’s limited, nonetheless. A fifth perspective would see Scripture permitting divorce and remarriage for almost any reason.

We just don’t have time today to consider all the arguments and counter arguments for all these opinions and interpretations. What I offer to you today are my own conclusions as I study the Bible. Most of you know that both Cheryl and I suffered divorce in our first marriages. Some will assume that because I myself have been divorced and remarried

that I have – all too conveniently – made the Bible fit my own life situation. Of course, that's a possibility. All I can say in my own defense is that my understanding of the Bible on this issue was very much the same before I experienced divorce and remarriage as it is today. Let's simply acknowledge the obvious fact that people who love Jesus, people who have a very high view of the Bible and its authority, and people who sincerely want to follow Jesus obediently differ on where to come down on this issue. Read the Bible for yourself, study it, read what Bible scholars say about the relevant passages, and come to your own conclusions. Let me begin by addressing...

WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE?

We can only begin to understand what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage if we understand, first of all, what God says about marriage. That's exactly where Jesus started in the passage we read a few minutes ago. He quoted Genesis. "Haven't you read the Scriptures? They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.'" (Gen. 1:27) This explains why "a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." (Gen. 2:24) Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together." (Mt. 19:4-6 NLT) The first and most important truth is simply this: marriage is God's creation. Marriage is God's idea, God's plan, and God's invention. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden and the very first two human beings God created – Adam and Eve. God understood it wasn't good for Adam to be alone, so He created Eve out of Adam and brought her to him as a lifelong companion and partner.

Throughout the Bible, we find it teaches marriage is a covenant. For example, one verse says, "The LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant." (Mal. 2:14 NIV) God rebuked the men of Israel for being unfaithful in their marriages. What's a covenant? It's simply an agreement between two parties based on mutual promises and obligations. It's like a contract. When you sign mortgage papers, you establish a covenant with the bank. In the Bible, a covenant is a contract that established personal relationships. God established a covenant with Abraham, with David, and with the people of Israel as a whole. The key ingredient in a covenant is faithfulness. You give your word you will do this and that and then you do it. So from the Bible's perspective, the single most important factor in the covenant of marriage isn't romance (although that's a very nice feature, to be sure), but faithfulness to the promises you made before God and to your spouse.

As a result, the Bible teaches and assumes that marriage is a whole-person, lifelong commitment. God intended marriage to last a lifetime. God invented marriage to be a relationship where two people – one man and one woman – would be totally committed to each other for their entire lives. That relationship would supersede and be more important than any other human relationship. It's supposed to be a greater bond than your relationship to your parents or to your children. You leave your family of origin physically and create a new family with your spouse. I know some people have revised their marriage vows to say something like promising to be together "as long as we both

shall love” rather than “as long as we both shall live.” That contradicts God’s vision for marriage. Marriage is supposed to be a whole-person, lifelong commitment.

There are trees in Washington State’s northern Cascade Mountains that are hundreds of years old. One tree is 700 years old. Typically, most forests experience a damaging forest fire every 50 to 60 years. The reason those trees in the Cascades live so long is because the drenching rains protect them from forest fires caused by strikes of lightning. Strong marriages – even marriages among followers of Jesus – are going to get struck by lightning, so to speak: sexual temptations, communication problems, unrealized expectations, and various frustrations. But if your marriage is heavily watered by unwavering commitment to please God above everything else, the conditions that cause a devastating relationship fire will be lowered. The National Forest Service put a sign in front of that 700 year old tree that says “it had survived seven centuries. It had simply gone the distance, and in so doing, it commanded attention.” So does the marriage that prevails over one’s entire lifetime. Only when we understand God’s original intention for what He created – marriage – can we try to answer the second question...

WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

God hates it. God’s Word says, “Didn’t the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard your heart; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. ‘For I hate divorce!’ says the LORD, the God of Israel. ‘To divorce your wife is to overwhelm her with cruelty,’ says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ‘So guard your heart; do not be unfaithful to your wife.’” (Mal 2:15-16 NLT) Why does God hate divorce? God hates it because it destroys something He created to bless and benefit human beings – marriage. God hates divorce because it floods the lives of people He loves with enormous amounts of avoidable pain in this life. God hates divorce because innocent people – especially children – suffer in ways He never intended.

The Bible says divorce is always the result of sin. Now to say divorce is always the result of sin is not the same as saying the actual decision to end a marriage is always a sin. If you think that’s so much “splitting hairs,” consider this Scripture from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. “Suppose a man marries a woman but she does not please him. Having discovered something wrong with her, he writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house. When she leaves his house, she is free to marry another man. But if the second husband also turns against her, writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away, or if he dies, the first husband may not marry her again, for she has been defiled. That would be detestable to the LORD.” (Dt. 24:1-4 NLT) I think it’s a mistake to say the decision to end a marriage is always, in and of itself, a sin. God never gives permission for us to commit sin. He never says, “Adultery is a sin, but if you’re going to commit it, then here’s how to go about it.” He never says, “Stealing is a sin, but if you’re bound and determined to steal, then here’s how to do it.” But when it came to divorce, God allowed it even though He hated it. It seems to me God understood that sometimes the decision

to end a marriage is the only way to deal with the disruption and destruction that sin – by one or both spouses – has caused to the relationship. That’s exactly Jesus’ point when He said, “Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended.” (Mt. 19:8 NLT) Sadly, divorce may be the only reasonable solution to a marriage fractured and broken by sin.

The truth of that observation is evidenced by the two explicit conditions for permitting divorce found in the Bible. The first one is found in what Jesus said, “And I tell you this, whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.” (Mt. 19:9 NLT) Because sex within marriage signifies or symbolizes becoming one flesh, for the same reason, God considers sex outside of marriage the destruction of the covenant between a husband and a wife. Jesus didn’t say people must get divorced if there’s been unfaithfulness. He simply acknowledged that sin can indeed harm a marital relationship beyond repair. The other explicit condition found in Scripture is desertion of a Christian spouse by a non-Christian spouse. “If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him.... But if the husband or wife who isn’t a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the believing husband or wife is no longer bound to the other, for God has called you to live in peace.” (1 Cor. 7:12-13, 15 NLT) The Christian leader, Paul, was addressing what happened when one spouse became a believer, but the other one didn’t. In some cases, that caused great tension in the marriage, and so – inspired by the Holy Spirit – he said desertion was grounds for divorce and remarriage.

Are there other biblically permissible reasons for divorce? The safest position is to acknowledge that only these two conditions can be found in the Bible explicitly. You might be able to identify other implicit conditions which will then reveal something of how you interpret the Bible. Was it God’s intent to limit the grounds of divorce to sexual unfaithfulness and desertion or was that more illustrative than exhaustive? For example, the Bible says nothing about a wife who is physically abused repeatedly. Is that grounds for divorce biblically? It isn’t difficult for me to consider abuse as a form of desertion by her husband. It’s possible to abandon someone emotionally but still be present physically. At the same time, it’s wise to be very careful about what we consider justifiable reasons to end a marriage. Even followers of Jesus can decide to divorce for inadequate, superficial reasons that God simply doesn’t recognize as legitimate. For example, I can’t see how incompatibility is a reason God would ever sanction as being worthy of abandoning a marriage relationship.

Let’s realize another important truth about divorce. It results in painful, serious consequences regardless of who’s to blame. Even if your divorce met biblical conditions, it’s still a violation of God’s intended plan and purpose. There will be painful consequences for all concerned. Sometimes, I think we forget as Christians that when God forgives sin, He doesn’t always remove the consequences of sin. Because divorce involves sin at some level by one or both people, there will be great pain whether it’s your fault or not. You will suffer. Your former spouse will suffer. If you have children,

they will suffer. Being single again, the exhausting demands of single parenthood, the difficult issues you have to navigate through in remarriage, and the problems inherent in blending two different families are just some examples of these painful consequences.

I can speak from personal experience. Do I believe my divorce was permitted by the Bible? Yes. Has God spared me all the painful consequences of divorce? No. My divorce some 27 years ago now was easily the single more devastating experience I've suffered in my life so far. It was like falling into a bottomless pit of pain and wondering if you were going to emerge alive. My ex-wife moved to Florida a few years after we divorced. My two children lived with me for a few years, but moved away to live with their mother when they entered 10th grade. I missed those high school years and that wonderful time in their lives. I never saw them as much as I wanted. Today, I have a great relationship with both of my children, but I can't ever get those years back. God has blessed Cheryl and me richly by bringing us together in a second marriage for which we are eternally grateful, but being a blended family has its difficult issues and hassles as well. I'm not sure the unpleasant consequences of divorce ever disappear this side of Heaven. Some years ago, I read a book about blended families. One of the authors explained she continued "to miss" her first marriage and family. No, she did not miss the pain of that first miserable, failed marriage relationship, but she did miss the simplicity and normalcy of how God intended marriage and family to work. It's no wonder God hates divorce. I hate it, too, and so should you!

The Bible also makes it clear that reconciliation is to be preferred to divorce. Yes, divorce is permitted under certain conditions, but it's never commanded – not even for adultery, not even for desertion. If there can be authentic repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, pursue it with all your energy and claim it as God's gracious gift. Let's quickly try to answer a final question.

WHAT DOES GOD SAY ABOUT REMARRIAGE?

I see the Bible offering at least three permissions for remarriage after a divorce explicitly or implicitly. Remarriage is permitted when the former spouse has died. That seems rather obvious, but it's a point that needs to be made. Death ends any and every marital relationship. Scripture says, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord." (1 Cor. 7:39 NLT) The Bible indicates that when a divorce has occurred for justifiable reasons – adultery or desertion – the innocent former spouse is free to remarry. Jesus implied in Matthew 19 – our text today – that the person not guilty of adultery was free to remarry. When Paul said a deserted spouse was "not bound" in the 1 Corinthians passage we read, he was referring to the original marriage vows. A spouse who had been abandoned was free to remarry. When a former spouse has remarried, the other person is permitted to remarry. Regardless of the reasons for the divorce itself, if a former partner has gotten remarried the original marriage has been permanently broken and reconciliation is now no longer possible. The unmarried former spouse is free to remarry. Let me add this additional thought. I can't find a Scripture where God forbids remarriage as some kind of permanent punishment for even an

illegitimate divorce. But common sense and experience tell us that remarriage may be the very worst option for a divorced person until and unless he or she understands what caused the first marriage to fail and until and unless there's been adequate time for spiritual and emotional healing. Rushing into remarriage is a foolish decision.

I could say so much more about this subject today, but we don't have the time. I hope and pray I've not conveyed to you that God thinks divorce is OK. On the authority of Scripture itself and from personal experience I can say, avoid it at all costs. But Jesus was realistic, too. Because of sin, divorce is a reality and always will be this side of Heaven. So, how should we interact with people here in our church who have gone through or are considering a divorce? I speak from personal experience. When you're going through a divorce, you feel like such a monumental failure. You feel so ashamed. You feel like you've plunged an emotional knife into your kids' hearts. You wonder if there will ever be again moments of joy, beauty, and love in your life. When I went through my divorce, it was God, my family, and the church I served at that time that held me together and helped to put me back together.

This church should speak the truth about divorce – don't ever minimize or sugarcoat it – and love divorced people. After all, this church – like any other church – isn't a museum for perfect people, but a hospital for spiritually sick people. It's absolutely true God hates divorce, but He loves divorced people! Most people going through a divorce need compassion, healing, forgiveness, and a fresh infusion of God's grace into their lives. Let's never surrender God's intent and vision for marriage. It's His creation – His invention. Let's celebrate long, healthy marriages at any and every opportunity. Let's do everything possible to discourage divorce as something to be avoided at all costs. Let's challenge and confront divorce for inadequate reasons. But if and when divorce happens – and sadly, it will - let's surround divorced people with God's love and grace.

Rick and Kay Warren, one of the most public ministry couples in America, seem to have the ideal marriage. Rick Warren pastors one of the largest churches in America. But Kay Warren admits that their relationship descended into what she calls "marriage hell." Married at the age of 21, their brand-new marriage took an instant nosedive. They didn't even make it to the end of their two-week honeymoon before they knew their relationship was in serious trouble. They'd been warned about five areas of potential conflict all couples have to deal with, and they immediately jumped into all five of them: sex, communication, money, children, and in-laws. Then they argued about their arguments and began to layer resentment on top of resentment. It was a perfect setup for misery and disenchantment. Healing started to come, but it was an agonizing process. I appreciate what Kay Warren has honestly written about her marriage:

"I don't approach this subject from the Hallmark-card version of marriage but from the blood, sweat, and tears of the trenches where our marriage was forged and is sustained. I know what it's like to choose to build our relationship; to seek marriage counseling again and again; to allow our small group and our family into the struggle; to determine one more time to say, 'Let's start over' and 'Please forgive me, I was wrong' and 'I forgive you.' I know what it's like to admit that my way isn't the only way to see

the world and to try to imagine what it's like to be on the other side of me; to choose to focus on what is good and right and honorable in my husband instead of what drives me crazy; to turn attraction to another man into attraction to my husband.... Each of us is not who the other was looking for, but each of us is who the other desperately needed to become the person we each are today. Yet, it's also been the very best thing that has ever happened to either of us. We wouldn't be who we are today without each other ... The shrieks of iron sharpening iron have often sounded like gears grinding on bare metal, but the result has been profound personal growth in both of us.”

If you enjoy a happy marriage, thank God every day for that profound blessing. If you're in a troubled, difficult marriage, avoid divorce at all costs and throw yourself on God for help and mercy. If you're going through a divorce or you've experienced divorce, remember God still loves you and His grace is sufficient.