

Divorce and Remarriage

I. Introduction:

It is clear from scripture that divorce is not the preference of God the Father, nor of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, scripture teaches that God hates divorce because it always involves unfaithfulness to the solemn covenant of marriage, and because it brings harmful consequences to those partners and their children (Mal. 2:14-16). Divorce in scripture is permitted only because of man's sin, and is only allowed under very limited circumstances. Since divorce is only a concession to man's sin and is not part of God's original plan for marriage, all believers should hate divorce as God does and pursue it only when there is no other recourse. With God's help a marriage can survive the worst sins. It is our desire to honor God in how we approach this subject.

II. Related Scriptures:

Genesis 2:24; Matt. 5:23-24, 32; Matt. 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39-40; 1 Cor. 7:10-27; 2 Cor. 6:14.

III. Discussion

A. Divorce:

There are only two clear reasons given to us in scripture that would allow a believer to divorce his/her spouse.

- 1) The first is in the situation that an unbelieving spouse chooses to no longer live with the believing spouse (often referred to as "desertion"). This may seem obvious, but it is important that the believer understand that he/she "is not under bondage in such cases" (1 Cor. 7:12-15) and is therefore no longer obligated to remain married. When an unbeliever desires to leave, trying to keep him or her in the marriage may only create greater tension and conflict. Also, if the unbeliever leaves the marital relationship permanently but is not willing to file for divorce, then the believer is in an impossible situation of having legal and moral obligations that he or she cannot fulfill. Because "the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases" (1 Cor. 7:15) and is therefore no longer obligated to remain married, the believer may file for divorce without fearing the displeasure of God.
- 2) The second is if the spouse commits sexual immorality (Matt. 19:3-9). Jesus uses the term "pornea" in this passage (as well as in Matt. 5:32), which encompasses adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one partner violates the unity and intimacy of a marriage by sexual immorality – and forsakes his or her covenant obligation – the faithful partner is placed in an extremely difficult situation. However, even in a situation such as this, divorce should be pursued reluctantly and because there is no other recourse. In some cases, separation may be appropriate for a period of time in order to ensure that any repentance by the unfaithful partner is in fact true. After all means are exhausted to bring the unfaithful partner to repentance, the Bible permits release for the faithful partner through divorce (Matt. 5:32; 1 Cor. 7:15).

B. Remarriage:

Scripture provides us with two situations in which the believer is free to remarry:

- 1) The first situation in which a believer can remarry is upon the death of the spouse (Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39-40).

2) The second is if the divorce was on biblical grounds (1 Cor. 7:15; Matt. 19:8-9).

Those who divorce on any other grounds have sinned against God and their partners, and for them to marry another is an act of "adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). This is why Paul says that a believing woman who sinfully divorces should "remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband" (1 Cor. 7:10-11). If she repents from her sin of unbiblical divorce, the true fruits of that repentance would be to seek reconciliation with her former husband (Matt. 5:23-24). The same is true for a man who divorces unbiblically (1 Cor. 7:11). The only time such a person could remarry another is if the former spouse remarries, proves to be an unbeliever, or dies, in which cases reconciliation would no longer be possible.

There may be situations that do not fall under the guidelines noted above. For example, a spouse that is a professing believer may have undergone church discipline for an unrepentant sin, and as a result is now regarded as an unbeliever in the local church fellowship (Matt. 18:17). If the guilty spouse were to file for divorce and remain single, would the believing spouse be free to remarry? What makes this situation difficult is that upon the remarriage of the believing spouse, the door to reconciliation of the first marriage will be closed. In all situations, we believe that it is most pleasing to the Lord if the true desire and goal of any married believer is reconciliation of the marriage. The Bible also gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If the divorce was not on biblical grounds and there is still a responsibility to reconcile, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer (Mark 10:12).

C. The Role of the Church:

Believers who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds are subject to church discipline because they openly reject the Word of God. The one who obtains an unbiblical divorce and remarries is guilty of adultery since God did not permit the original divorce (Matt. 5:32; Mark 10:11-12). That person is subject to the steps of church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. If a professing Christian violates the marriage covenant and refuses to repent during the process of church discipline, scripture instructs that he or she should be put out of the church and treated as an unbeliever (v. 17). When the discipline results in such a reclassification of the disobedient spouse as an "outcast" or unbeliever, the faithful partner would be free to divorce according to the provision for divorce as in the case of an unbeliever departing, as stated in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Before such a divorce, however, reasonable time should be allowed for the possibility of the unfaithful spouse returning because of the discipline.

The leadership in the local church should also help single believers who have been divorced to understand their situation biblically, especially in cases where the appropriate application of biblical teaching does not seem clear. For example, the church leadership may at times need to decide whether one or both of the former partners could be legitimately considered "believers" at the time of their past divorce, because this will affect the application of biblical principles to their current situation (1 Cor. 7:17-24). Also, because people often transfer to or from other churches and many of those churches do not practice church discipline, it might be necessary for the leadership to decide whether a member's estranged or former spouse should currently be considered a Christian or treated as an unbeliever because of continued disobedience. Again, in some cases this would affect the application of the biblical principles (1 Cor. 7:15; 2 Cor. 6:14).

D. Pre-conversion Divorce:

According to 1 Corinthians 7:20-27, there is nothing in salvation that demands a particular social or marital status. The Apostle Paul, therefore, instructs believers to recognize that God providentially allows the circumstances they find themselves in when they come to Christ. If they were called while married, then they are not required to seek a divorce (even though divorce may be permitted on biblical grounds). If they were called while divorced, and cannot be reconciled to their former spouse because that spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then they are free to either remain single or be remarried to another believer (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14).

E. Repentance and Forgiveness:

In cases where divorce took place on unbiblical grounds and the guilty partner later repents, the grace of God is operative at the point of repentance. A sign of true repentance will be a desire to implement 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, which would involve a willingness to pursue reconciliation with his or her former spouse, if that is possible. If reconciliation is not possible, however, because the former spouse is an unbeliever or is remarried, then the forgiven believer could pursue another relationship under the careful guidance and counsel of church leadership.

In cases where a believer obtained a divorce on unbiblical grounds and remarried, he or she is guilty of the sin of adultery until that sin is confessed (Mark 10:11-12). God does forgive that sin immediately when repentance takes place, and there is nothing in scripture to indicate anything other than that. From that point on the believer should continue in his or her current marriage.

IV. Conclusion

Marriage was created by God (Genesis 2:24) and it was intended to be for life (Mark 10:2-12). Christ taught that God's law allowed divorce only because of "hardness of heart" (Matt. 19:8). Legal divorce was a concession for the faithful partner due to the sexual sin or abandonment by the sinning partner, so that the faithful partner was no longer bound to the marriage (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:12-15). Although Jesus did say that divorce is permitted in some situations, we must remember that His primary point in this discourse is to correct the Jew's idea that they could divorce one another "for any cause at all" (Matt. 19:3), and to show them the gravity of pursuing a sinful divorce. Therefore, the believer should never consider divorce except in specific circumstances, and even in those circumstances it should only be pursued reluctantly and because there is no other recourse.