

A Biblical Divorce

Many homes around the world have been affected by divorce. In the United States divorce has been experienced by 46% of those who were born between 1946 and 1964, and by 27% of those born between the years of 1965 and 1983. According to statistics, two-thirds to three-fourths of all divorces are initiated by women. That is a surprising figure. The Barna Group, a Christian polling organization (www.barna.org) states, “the percentage of atheists and agnostics who have been married and divorced is 37% - very similar to the number for the born again population.” The percentage of divorces among born again Christians is 35%. Barna also reports that among those who call themselves Christians: Roman Catholics are the least likely to divorce at 25%. Among Protestants, Presbyterians are next at 28% and Pentecostals have the highest divorce rate at 44%.

Divorce is as common as ice cream, bread, stealing, and red roses. Pledges, promises, vows, and statements of love at the altar of marriage often become worthless in the years that follow. Yet, others take marriage seriously and make commitments for life when they say, “For better or for worse . . .” We live in times when immediate satisfaction is more important than anything else. Marriage is “nice,” but it is being trashed by many when the emotional threads of the relationship are pulled tight. Those who divorce either do not know of or ignore a study published by *Psychology Today*. The study states that 78% that those who remain in a difficult marriage report five years later that they are “very happy” (*Psychology Today*, v 35, i6, June 9, 2004 p. 26(1)). This means that those who discard their marriages are discarding something that would most likely make them “very happy” if they had remained married. Those who leave have sacrificed much.

BACKGROUND. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about adultery first and now divorce. Our last study was a warning not to commit adultery (Matt. 5:27-30). Adultery starts in the emotions of the heart and then leads to the physical act. Jesus warned us to take whatever actions we must to avoid adultery. His illustrations about plucking out our eye or cutting off our right hand were extreme, but we understood His message. He was warning us to be willing to give up even our most valuable treasures in order to avoid adultery.

In this study (Matt. 5:31-32) Jesus talks to us about another tragedy that may occur between a husband and wife - divorce. Most divorces occur for rea-

sons other than adultery. The leading reasons that are given for divorce are physical violence, incompatibility, alcohol and drug abuse, different beliefs, religious conflicts, financial problems, and poor communication. When Jesus talked about divorce during the Sermon on the Mount, He did not talk about any of these reasons. He did not give any statistics or quote *Psychology Today*. Jesus did not talk about low self-esteem, poverty, or problems related to parents.

IT WAS SAID. The religious leaders of His day did not value marriage, but God did. So Jesus said,

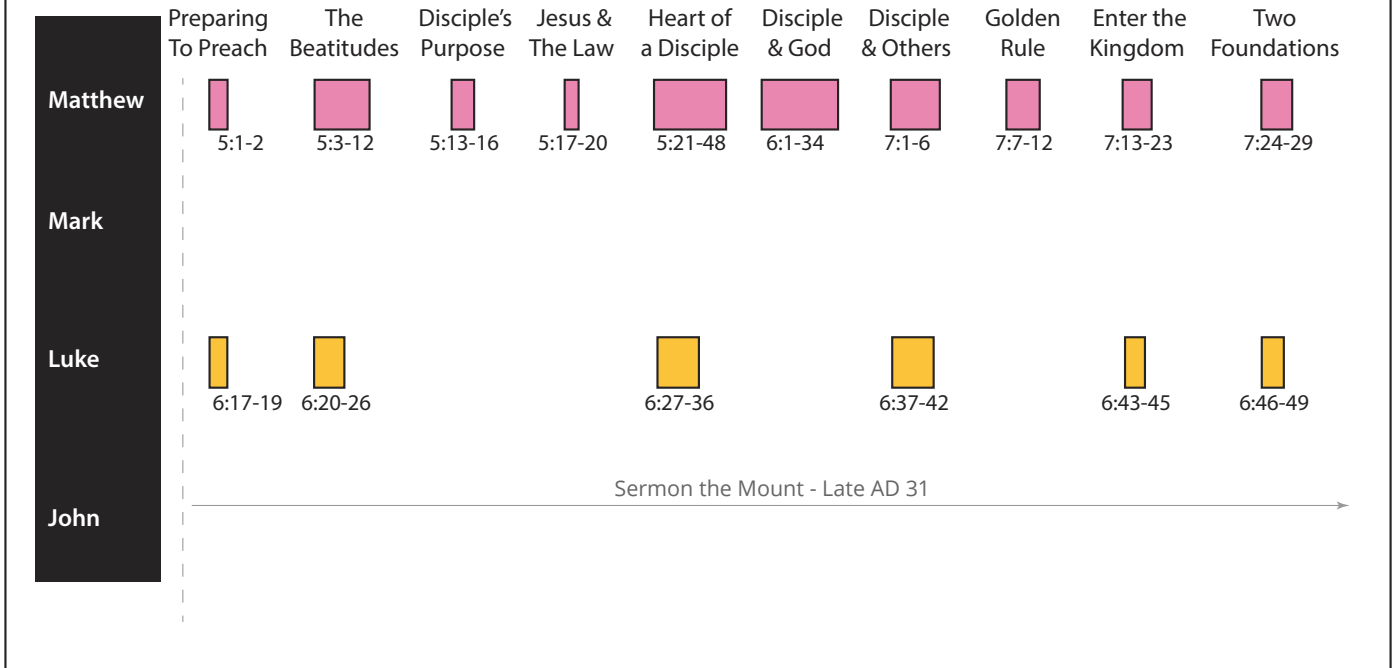


Divorce - A Shattered Marriage is Not God's Plan

It was said,
“WHOEVER
SENDS HIS
WIFE AWAY,
LET HIM
GIVE HER A
CERTIFICATE
OF DIVORCE”
. . . (NASB)
Matt. 5:31

Life and Heart of Jesus

Sermon on the Mount



Jesus paraphrased Deuteronomy 24:1 which reads as follows:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house . . . (NASB) Deut. 24:1

Moses' command to allow divorce was given because of the hardness of our hearts (Matt. 19:8). But the religious leaders of Jesus' day took it as permission to dump one's spouse for almost any reason.

The Jewish religious leaders had different interpretations of this passage. The House of Shammai taught that the passage allowed divorce only for the act of adultery. However, when we look closely at the Deut. 24:1 passage, we discover that it does not say that. It is not clear why they believed this. The House of Hillel taught the passage allowed for divorce if a husband's wife did something wrong such as burn his meal or put too much salt on it. They believed that the phrase "found some indecency" was the acceptable reason. Rabbi Aqiba added that divorce was also allowed if the husband

found someone who was more beautiful. He believed the phrase "no favor in his eyes" meant that. If his eyes saw someone else more pleasing, then he could change wives. Unfortunately, during Jesus' day the opinion of the House of Hillel was the popular view.

Consequently, Jewish husbands were divorcing their wives for ridiculous reasons. The religious leaders had also given rules for how a divorce had to be filed. The divorce document had to have twelve lines - no more and no less. They specified the type of ink that had to be used. They required witnesses for the signing of the document and for its delivery. The wife could not appeal the husband's decision, and the divorce certificate had to be delivered by two people who were not blind, dumb, or deaf. The divorce document was called a "Bill of Cutting Off" because the wife was literally cut-off. She was cut-off from everything.

BUT I SAY. But their interpretation of Deut. 24:1 was wrong. God did not want them to treat their spouses in this manner. They had abused the passage just as many do today. The popular view of the people was a liberal view of Deut. 24:1 that allowed them to do whatever they wanted. They

did not realize that divorce was the door to more pain - not less pain.

So Jesus added this,

... but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (NASB) Matt. 5:32

Jesus emphasized the fact that He was teaching. He repeated the word "I" so that Jesus statement literally says, "I, I say." He was emphatic, "I say that everyone who divorces, except for . . . Unchastity . . ." The Greek word that Jesus uses for "unchastity" is PORNEIA. This Greek word has a broader meaning than just sexual relations with someone of the opposite sex. The word can refer to heterosexual and homosexual activity as well as incest and sex with an animal. It included any sexual activity outside of the marital relationship.

Jesus granted divorce only when the physical relationship of marriage is violated. A divorce for sexual unfaithfulness is a biblical divorce because it is granted by God with His blessing. But divorce for any other reason does not have His blessing.

If a husband divorces his wife for any other reason and then his wife marries someone else, she commits adultery and so does the man who marries her. At first it might seem that this passage is biased against wives, but Luke provides a balanced picture,

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (NASB) Luke 16:18

Luke says that if the husband marries, he will commit adultery and so will anyone who marries him too! So in summary, if a divorce occurs for unbiblical reasons - other than sexual activity outside of marriage - then both the husband

and wife commit adultery if they marry someone else. Whoever then marries him/her also commits adultery. A marriage resulting in adultery displeases God. Now that is tough.

ONE MORE REASON FOR DIVORCE. Today couples are ignoring God and divorcing anyway. They get divorced because the wife has a clutter problem in the home, the wife is too fat, he is too lazy, he does not make enough money, he wants too much sex, "I am no longer number one in his life," or "he has emotionally left me." These are just a few reasons.

The last reason was given to me some years ago by a young woman who felt rejected by her husband. She claimed to be a Christian. So when I asked her why she believed that it was okay to leave her husband, she said that 1 Cor. 7:12-15 gave her permission to divorce him. Here is the passage she referred to.



Is Your Divorce a Biblical Divorce?

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believ-

ing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. (NASB) 1 Cor. 7:12-15

I had to explain that the passage is talking about an unbelieving wife leaving her husband or an unbelieving husband leaving his wife. That is, if the unbelieving spouse no longer wants to live with the believing spouse, then the Christian spouse is supposed to let him or her go. God understands that those who do not believe in God might not want to live with a Christian.

God allows a biblical divorce in these situations. God grants a biblical divorce for two reasons: 1) sexual activity

Myths About Divorce

Statement	True or False?
1) Half of all marriages end in divorce.	1) False - The divorce rate since 2001 is only about 40%.
2) Second marriages tend to be more successful than first marriages because people learn from the first one.	2) False - Second marriages have a higher divorce rate.
3) Living together before marriage is a good way to reduce the chances of divorce.	3) False - Many studies indicate that the divorce rate is higher.
4) Having a child together will help a couple to improve their marital satisfaction and prevent a divorce.	4) False - Many studies have shown that children increase stress with the couple.
5) When parents don't get along, children are better off if their parents divorce.	5) False - Many studies indicate that is better that the parents work through issues.
6) Unhappiness at certain points in a marriage is a good sign that the marriage will eventually end in divorce.	6) False - 60% of unhappily married couples who remained together rated their marriages as either "very happy" or "quite happy" five years later.
7) Men usually initiate divorce proceedings.	

outside of marriage, and 2) when the unbelieving spouse wants to leave. Those who have a biblical divorce have the right to remarry without sinning. However, God hates divorce even in these situations (Mal. 2:16). Divorce for any other reason does not have God's blessing.

RESULTS OF MANY STUDIES. The Marriage Project from the State University at New Jersey has given us a glimpse of several key factors impacting marriage. The findings from this and other research studies present a picture of marriage that is contrary to that presented in the media, novels, the movies, and in folk myth. Living together before marriage, having babies before marriage, and low income are the major contributors to an unhappy marriage.

According to a study conducted by the Marriage Therapy program at Brigham Young University, some key factors predicting marital dissatisfaction included: a variety of personal negative traits, premarital sex, premarital pregnancy, and cohabitation along with parental divorce, chronic marital conflict, youthfulness, and parental disapproval. We should not be surprised that sexual activities before marriage impact

the success of marriage (<http://www.divorcereform.org/mel/ahelpingmarr.html>). God warns us against such activities for our own good. In 1 Cor. 6:18 God says this,

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. (NASB) 1 Cor. 6:18

It is a warning that sexual sin is against one's own body. It does spiritual damage to us. We should not be surprised that God said it before the studies did. Sexual activities outside marriage damage the fabric of our being and our relationships with our spouses. God understands this and has granted the right of a biblical divorce when sexual sin occurs.

GOD'S SOLUTION. Are you considering divorce or is your marriage in trouble? Yes, God has granted us the right of a biblical divorce, but He still hates it.

For I hate divorce," says the LORD . . . (NASB) Mal. 2:16

Chances of Divorce in the First Ten Years

The background characteristics of people entering a marriage have major implications for their risk of divorce. Here are some percentage point decreases in the risk of divorce or separation during the first ten years of marriage, according to various personal and social factors:

Factors	Percent Decrease in Risk of Divorce
Annual income over \$50,000 (vs. under \$25,000)	-30
Having a baby seven months or more after marriage (vs. before marriage)	-24
Marrying over 25 years of age (vs. under 18)	-24
Religious affiliation (vs. none)	-14

He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives . . . (NASB) Matt. 19:8

Yet God understands.

God’s solution to preventing a divorce is not money, babies, age, one’s family background, or education. His solution calls us to follow Jesus Christ and then humbly confess to God our wrong behavior toward our spouse (1 John 1:9). When we confess our sins, God forgives. That is the first step. The second step is six words: “I am sorry” and “I forgive you.” “I am sorry” leads to an admission of the wrong that you have committed against your wife/husband. “I am sorry” reveals that you are sincere and want the relationship to change. You plan to make changes in your life. Tell your spouse that you love him/her and that you are committed to him/her for life. God wants us to be committed to our spouses. That is the message of Mal. 2:14.

This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, “For what reason?” Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (NASB) Mal. 2:13-14

Here God tells the Jewish people that because they were not faithful to their wives, He was rejecting them. When asked why, God said because they had been unfaithful to their wives. Notice that God says a woman is a wife by “covenant.” A woman becomes a wife by a vow or a commitment and nothing else. A wife should also be a “companion.” The Hebrew word for “companion” means “magical friend.” That is what a wife should be. A wife should be one’s magical friend and a husband should be committed to her.

The next step is to ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and control your life. Then submit to God and ask God to protect you against the evil one (Eph. 6:12). And finally, seek the best for your spouse.

AVOIDING TROUBLE. God has also given us guidelines to minimize the development of trouble in our marriages. One of the most important is to marry only another follower of Jesus Christ. Look for someone who demonstrates a serious passion for Jesus Christ. Do they really believe that Jesus is God, died for his/her sins, and obeys Him? Do they pray and read their Bible? What do they believe about the Bible and Jesus Christ? Some claim to be Christians and then live like non-Christians. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:39 commands us to marry only in the Lord. God is not inter-

ested in missionary marriages. That is, do not spend significant time with, cohabit, or marry someone with the idea of helping them believe in Jesus Christ. In Deuteronomy God warned the Israelites to not marry those of a different faith.

Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods . . . (NASB) Deut. 7:3-4

If your prospective wife or husband passes this test, then flee sexual sin. It will seriously damage your future as husband and wife. Not only has God warned us but the secular research says the same thing.

Spend time getting to know one another before you say, “I do!” Above all pray regularly asking God to direct you in your decision of a life partner. Take at least one year. Make sure this person is a Christian and has a serious and consistent walk with the Lord Jesus. The relationship of both of you with Jesus Christ will be the ultimate key to success in

your marriage in the years that follow.

CONCLUSION. Marriage was God’s idea when He introduced Eve to Adam. Marriage is commitment to a magical friend who shares his/her inner thoughts, joys, frustrations, energies, sexual thrills, spiritual passions, and love with you.

Marriage means . . .
You are the other part of me
I am the other part of you.
We’ll work through
With never a thought of walking out.

Marriage means . . .
Two imperfect mates
Building permanently
Giving totally
In partnership with a perfect God.
Marriage, my love, means us!

(Ruth Harms Calkins, *Love Is So Much More*, Lord).