

1 Corinthians #12
The Biblical Principles of Divorce
1 Corinthians 7: 39-40

Divorce is a subject which touches the lives of all of us in this service tonight. Somewhere, in some way, every one of us has come in contact with the subject of divorce. Five out of nine marriages in America tonight end up in divorce. **In the last ten years, single parentage has risen eighty percent in America. One out of every five households tonight is led by a single parent.** Marriage in America is in trouble, and one of the greatest troubles is this thing we call “divorce.”

Now the subject of divorce is a very emotional subject. It is so very near to where we live. It is so very touching in the experience of those who go through it that it is a very emotional matter.

There is wide spread disagreement about the meaning of divorce, and what the Bible says about the subject. Churches from place to place have different views and positions on the subject of divorce. Preachers differ on what the Bible really says about divorce. **I have many preacher-friends whom I respect and whom I love, who take different views from me on this matter of divorce. Individuals differ in the interpretation of what the Scripture has to say concerning divorce.**

Now because of that fact, and because divorce is such an emotional matter, we must be very careful to avoid two extremes on the subject. *Number one*, we want to avoid the extreme of *permissiveness*. We never want to be permissive, and condone what God may condemn. *Number two*, we want to be very careful, that we never become harsh or judgmental. We must never ever make the mistake of looking down on a person because of some problem or some sin in their lives. **And so, we are going to try to avoid these two extremes tonight.**

The idea that two individuals who have lived together can separate and go through a divorce and remain untouched and unharmed is an erroneous idea. It is a very serious problem. It is a very heart-rending experience.

I agree with the writer who said, "Two processes ought never to be entered into prematurely: embalming and divorce." **Let me assure you that there is no marital problem so great that God cannot solve it.** No marriage, no matter how weak or scarred, need end. I have seen God turn numerous husbands and wives around - 180 degrees. **Why? Because it was never His original design that homes be destroyed.** And because His Word is filled with promises that hold out hope to those who have blown it.

But divorce still occurs. Now, more than ever. Often against the desire of one of the partners. **Often in spite of assistance, effort, and much prayer by friends. Often between two Christians - yes, often.** And always where biblical principles were unknown, ignored, or openly violated. **Nevertheless, divorce happens. It's a fact we may hate, but one we cannot deny.**

Therefore, as we have come to this place in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I have decided to deal with this matter.

In many of our churches today many a divorced person grinding out his or her life under an enormous load of unnecessary guilt. While I certainly do not wish to seem permissive on divorce, I do hope that this message will provide the breathing room that God has allowed in certain instances. One of my greatest concerns is that someone might hear this message and misinterpret what I am saying. You see, *disagreement* is one thing; *misinterpretation* is another. And the emotions surrounding something as stressful as divorce have a way of playing tricks on one's mind, increasing the possibility of misinterpreting what one hears. Therefore, if you have some problems, listen to the CD, or internet, before you get too upset.

It should surprise no one that divorce was never in the original design for the home. Not only is that implied in the Genesis account, it is clearly stated by Jesus in Matthew 19:8, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.”

God's original plan of God was simple and clear: one man (Adam) with one woman (Eve) joined together in a permanent union (marriage) throughout life. How perfect. Yes, and how innocent. Remember, sin was not yet present. Nor a carnal nature within human life. In the beginning days of the home, (think of it), there was absolute perfection.

Man was totally innocent. Uncontaminated, as seen in Genesis 5:1-2, “...In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created.”

Clear enough, isn't it? Sinlessness. God's likeness infused into two human beings. **The very image of God was stamped upon His creation.**

But do not stop there, look at the very next verse, “When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years; he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.” **Did you see the difference?** Look at the words, “according to his (his father's) image.” Adam had originally been created in God's likeness, but when Seth came along, he was in Adam's likeness.

Why? **Genesis 3 tells us that sin had invaded humanity.** And with the invasion of sin came all the horrible consequences, not the least of which was the beginning of strife, both internal (the root) and external (the fruit).

The disease impacted everything and everyone. Conflict replaced harmony. War replaced peace. Sorrow replaced joy. And things like disobedience, rebellion, argumentation, and even murder became the status quo. In nations, in cities, as well as in homes. And marriages were not exempt. Unlike the original couple, husbands and wives became selfish, demanding, brutal, unfaithful, angry, hateful, and competitive.

As time passed, the nation Israel ignored God's directions and intermarried with non-Israelites. As God's chosen people began to become more and more involved with idol worship, they ultimately began to lose their distinction. The Jew-Gentile mixture was more than God would allow...so a compromise was provided by Moses. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 tells us that because of the rampant epidemic that was threatening the uniqueness of Israel, God implemented the "certificate of divorce." Because of the stubborn, rebellious will of sinful people - Jesus called it "hardness of heart" divorce evolved. **But remember, it was not desired or designed in God's original arrangement for marriage. Sin polluted the plan.**

And because of the harsh presence and consequences of sin, divorce was permitted, lest marriage and the distinctives of a home that modeled God's character be completely nullified and destroyed. In that sense, divorce became a way of salvaging the believer's distinctives. But remember - it was never God's original intention or desire. **It was permitted once the ravages of sinfulness reached threatening proportions.**

But what about today? The question everyone wants answered is this: **When is divorce permissible?** Let me rephrase that question this way, "Are there any biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage?"

I believe there are. I have searched the Scriptures, read everything I can get my hands on, and discussed this issue with many pastors and students of the Bible. I have talked with numerous divorced people, single persons, married couples - both Christian and non-Christian. **And, after much prayer, I have concluded that the Christian does have biblical grounds for remarriage when the divorce transpired under one of the situations that we will look at together from the Word of God!**

First of all, when the marriage and divorce occurred prior to salvation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 reminds us, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold new things have come." **Now folks, I**

take this literally. I even take it to the extreme. I think "new" means "new." **So when God promises the believing child of God that he is a "new creature," then I take that to mean exactly that. A brand new, fresh creation, unlike before.**

The Greek word translated "new" is the word "kainos" (kahee-nos), which means "that which is unaccustomed or unused, not new in time, recent, but new as to form or quality, of different nature from what is contrasted as old." Jesus used this same word in John 13:34 when He spoke to His disciples concerning a "new commandment." He used it in Matthew 26:28-29 when He referred to a "new covenant." It is the word Paul used in Ephesians 2:15 when he spoke of the sinner being a "new man." He used the same word in Ephesians 4:24 when referring to a "new self." And it is the word John used in Revelation 2:17 when he spoke of a "new name" in heaven. And it is the word he used in Revelation 21:1 when he talked about the "new heaven and a new earth."

Ladies and gentlemen, there can be no question about it; this has in mind the brand new, fresh, unused creature that one becomes at the moment of salvation. And if that isn't enough, Paul goes on to add that at that same moment "the old things passed away." **Again, I take that literally. The old life, with all its old characteristics and sins.** They are, in grace, removed. The best word is "forgiven." **Totally and completely.**

If that seems too extreme for you, perhaps it would help to read, slowly, those opening words in Ephesians 2:1- 7, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." And in verses 19-22 of that same chapter, we have been told, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also, are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

Quite frankly, it is beyond my comprehension that passages such as these (there are dozens more) exclude divorce. If they do, then divorce is the

only sin not covered by the blood of Christ. It is the one, permanent spot in our, past that cannot be washed away. Furthermore, it is then questionable that we can take the words of David at face value when he writes in Psalm 103:10-12, “(God) has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

No, I believe "new" means "new." **And when God promises the passing away of "old things," it surely includes divorce prior to salvation.** After all, **being alienated from God and at enmity with Him, how could any unbeliever possibly know His will regarding the choice of a lifetime mate?** Having thought through this very carefully, I believe it falls within the context of God's superabundant grace to wipe our slate clean when we turn, by faith, to Christ the Lord.

When the marriage and divorce occurred prior to salvation, I believe God grants His "new creation" the freedom to remarry.

Second, when one's mate is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully with the married partner. I realize that much has been written on this particular issue, and I do not say this hurriedly or superficially. I am fully aware of the difficulties connected with determining who the guilty party really is when it comes to sexual promiscuity. I also acknowledge the subjectivity involved in identifying "sexual immorality." **Such matters must be carefully determined, usually with the help of a qualified counselor who can provide objectivity and wisdom in matters this serious. Each case must be considered independently.**

In spite of all that I have said, we cannot ignore or deny what Christ said in Matthew 19:9, “**And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.**” All sorts of interpretations have been suggested to explain what our Lord was saying.- Frankly, having examined many of the suggestions and theories (some of them are incredibly forced and complicated); I return to the verse and accept it at face value.

Throughout my ministry, I have operated under a very simple, yet reliable, principle of interpretation: "God said what He meant, and meant what He said."

Therefore, look at the situation here in Matthew 19. Jesus is answering a question asked by some Pharisees. It is a question related to divorce, as seen in verse 3, “**Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?**” This leads to a second question having to do with the reason divorce was permitted in the first

place, as seen in verse 7, "Why then did Moses command to Give her a certificate and divorce her?" His answer was clear in verse 8, "He said to them, Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way." And then, to clarify the matter even further, He adds in verse 9, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

This is Christ's personal counsel regarding justification for divorce and remarriage. I have no doubt that Christ said what He meant, and meant what He said. And in such cases our Lord grants freedom for that miserable and unbearable bond.

Third, when one of the mates is an unbeliever and willfully and permanently deserts the believing partner. 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 gives us this insight, "But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother (a Christian) has a wife who is an unbeliever (a non-Christian), and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman (a Christian) who has an unbelieving husband (a non-Christian), and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one (a non-Christian) leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister (a Christian) is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace."

Paul is giving sound advice on marriage. He is offering counsel nowhere else revealed in Scripture. This passage is unique in that it addresses the very common problem of a mixed marriage, that is, one partner is a Christian, the other is not. Interestingly, the counsel does not assume that such marriages are always unbearable. On the contrary, there are times when harmony and compatibility (to an extent) are possible. In such cases the Christian is strictly forbidden to walk away from the marriage. If the unbeliever desires to remain, then so be it.

But there are occasions when "the unbelieving one leaves." **Please take note that he or she is not forced out.** No, the non-Christian mate willfully deserts, walks out, refuses to stay, chooses to leave. What is God's counsel to the Christian who is left? "...let him leave." In other words, the Christian is not under obligation to plead, to beg, to bargain, or to force the non-Christian partner to remain. Rather, "...let him leave."

But that is not the end of this counsel. Verse 15 goes on to say, "...the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases..." **Of course, the key phrase is "not under bondage," and it obviously means being free of the respon-**

sibility of that marriage. The desertion of the unsaved partner breaks the bond, thus freeing the believer to divorce and remarry.

We have covered a lot of "ground" tonight, but let me close with this thought – Divorce was a divine concession to human weakness. No Christian should aggressively seek the dissolution of his or her marriage bond. Some of the very best things God has to teach His children are learned while working through marital difficulties. **There are many, many people who can testify of how God has graciously healed their marriages.**

But in certain extreme cases, against the wishes and efforts of the committed mate, the marriage bond is destroyed beyond any human ability to restore it. In such cases, Scripture teaches that God's divine concession to human weakness is occasionally justified, allowing the Christian divorced person the right and the freedom to remarry in the Lord.

Child of God, where God permits divorce and remarriage we must accept it without fear or guilt. Let us not call "unclean" what He now calls "clean." **Divorce is not an easy out, neither is it an unpardonable sin.**

I ask you to give your marriage over to the lordship of Jesus Christ tonight. If you have never been saved, why not tonight?