

Emmaus Correspondence School
©1984

Divorce and Remarriage

The whole subject of divorce and remarriage is one of the most vexing problems which the church faces today. Complicated cases are arising continually which would tax the wisdom of Solomon.

Of one thing we can be absolutely sure, namely, that divorce was never God's intention for man. His ideal is that a man and woman should remain married until the union is broken by death (Rom 7:1-3).

The Lord Jesus taught this clearly. When the Pharisees asked Him if it was lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause, He replied:

“. . .Have ye not read, that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So then, they are no more two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt. 19:4-6)

See also Mark 10:2-9.

To further emphasize the fact that divorce is contrary to God's will as a general rule, the Lord said:

“ Whoever divorces his wife,, and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.” (Lk. 16:18)

This is repeated in Mark 10:11 and 12 , but here it is broadened to include not only a man putting away his wife, but also a woman putting away her husband.

“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

If these were the only verses in the Bible on the subject, then there would be no further need of discussion. It would be obvious that God does not permit divorce under any circumstances. But these are not the only verses in God's Word on this topic. The Savior Himself made an exception to the general rule.

In Matthew 5:31, 32, for instance, He taught:

“ Furthermore it has been said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you, that whoever divorces his wife, for any reason except sexual immorality; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

Emmaus Correspondence School
©1984

This clearly establishes the principle that divorce is permitted where the wife has been guilty of sexual immorality. But if a husband puts away his wife for any other reason, he causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries her commits adultery.

For example, if a man divorces his wife for incompatibility or for mental cruelty, he causes her to commit adultery. Also, any man who marries a woman who is divorced for incompatibility or mental cruelty thereby commits adultery—because the woman is not divorced on Scriptural grounds. It is not a valid divorce. The man would be marrying another man's wife.

The Lord Jesus repeats this statement in Matthew 19:9:

“And I say to you, Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

Our conclusion thus far is that although divorce is not God's ideal, yet He does allow it in the case where one's partner has committed sexual immorality. This, of course, raises the question as to what is meant by sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality is any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. It includes illicit sex involving a single person, which in English usage is commonly called fornication. In the New Testament, the word *porneia* can refer to adultery, fornication or any other sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

When a spouse has been guilty of unfaithfulness, this does not mean that divorce is compulsory. It is permitted but not commanded. The offended party may show grace and forgiveness, and the original marriage may be continued (Mt. 23:21-22).

But is sexual immorality the only Scriptural ground on which a divorce may be obtained? Some students of the Bible suggest that another ground is given in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. This portion deals with the case where a believer is married to an unbeliever. (No doubt the believer was saved after marrying.) If the unbeliever is willing to remain with the Christian, then that is good because there is always the possibility of the unconverted person's being saved. If, however, the unbeliever leaves the Christian, the Scripture says that the latter “is not under bondage.” Many interpret this to mean that the Christian is at liberty to obtain a divorce on the ground of desertion.

The difficulty with this passage is that the words “not under bondage” are not very specific. While they may mean that a divorce is allowed, they do not clearly say so. Such Bible scholars as Ellicott, Darby, Grant, Hodge, and Jennings teach that divorce is permitted by 1 Corinthians 7:16, but many others feel that the verse deals only with separation and not divorce.

Emmaus Correspondence School
©1984

The question will arise, “What about people who were divorced before they were saved?” The answer is that Christ’s teaching on divorce was addressed to professing believers. It does not deal with the question of what people were before conversion. Unlawful divorces contracted before the time of one’s salvation should not exclude a person from the fellowship of the local church. Some of the Corinthian believers had formerly been fornicators, adulterers, thieves, drunkards, and other forms of sinners (1 Cor 6:9-10), but they had been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of God (1 Cor 6:11). Their past life did not bar them from full participation in the privileges of the local church.

A more difficult question concerns Christians who are divorced for reasons not allowed in the New Testament. Can they ever be received back into the fellowship of the local church? This raises the further question as to whether adultery is the state or condition in which they live, or if it describes the initial act. If such people are living in a state of adultery, then obviously they would have to repent and forsake their present partner. If, however, adultery only refers to the initial act, then presumably they could repent and be restored to fellowship.

In the matter of divorce, it seems that almost every case is different. The elders in a local church must investigate and deliberate in the fear of God and in obedience to His Word. When they take action in a godly manner, their decision is honored in heaven (Mt 18:18). The Christians should submit to the decision and not seek to defend the disciplined parties.

Another point that should be mentioned is this: God is a realist. He states the ideal in His Word concerning the marriage relationship, but He realizes that not all will attain the ideal. So He makes allowances for some things which He does not necessarily approve.

Also, God’s remedy for these problems is never one that creates worse problems. If, in order to untangle a marital snarl, men or women are forced into sin, or women and children are left homeless or penniless, the solution could be worse than the problem.

Remarriage

It is often contended that although divorce is permitted by the New Testament, yet remarriage is never contemplated.

Such a position is pointless. One of the main purposes of a Scriptural divorce is to permit remarriage. Otherwise separation would be sufficient.

It seems clear from the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 5:31, 32, and 19:9, that if a person obtains a divorce on the ground of sexual immorality (or adultery), he is free to remarry. The expression “saving for the cause of “sexual immorality” permits both divorce and remarriage for that specific reason.

Conclusion

Emmaus Correspondence School
©1984

We conclude from the above study that God's ideal is that His people should continue in the married state until that state is broken by death. Divorce is not according to His will.

However, divorce is permitted when one partner in a marriage has been guilty of unfaithfulness. In such a case, the innocent party is free to remarry.

It is possible that the desertion of an unbelieving partner also constitutes grounds for divorce, but the Scripture is not sufficiently clear on this point that we can speak with finality.

In thinking of divorce, we dare not be more liberal than the Bible because this would only lead to a growing disrespect for the holy institution of marriage. Yet we must not be more strict than God's Word because this would amount to a limiting of the forgiving grace of God.

William MacDonald, Used with permission