



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 9 Number 22
June 11, 2014

Six Questions about Marriage

Part 2- Divorce and Remarriage

No earthly dimension of anyone's life is more important than that of marriage/family. For a Christian it is, next to receiving Jesus Christ as his or her Savior and Lord, the most critical part of one's emotional and spiritual development. How one approaches this aspect of life and the choices he or she makes about it will affect the quality of a Christian's life like nothing else. In this series we are examining what Jesus said about marriage and divorce. We are also looking at the guidelines given by Paul to the believers in Corinth who were struggling with various spiritual and moral problems, including marriage and divorce.

In the first installment we presented six significant questions about marriage and divorce:

1. Should Christians get married and why?
2. Who should get married and is it alright to remain single?
3. Should a husband and wife who are both Christians get divorced?
4. What about a case of one spouse being a believer and the other not a believer?
5. What about the case of when an unbelieving spouse divorces the believer— is the believer free to remarry?
6. What about the case of two unbelievers who marry and divorce?

In the first part we examined questions one and two with the biblical teachings on whether or not Christians should get married and why? We also discussed what the Bible says about who should get married and its teachings on singleness? (See Six Questions about Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage - Part 1)

In this installment we will answer the final four key questions that, as we indicated before, Christians should ask before they get married. Pastors also are concerned with these issues because they are often confronted with them when asked to perform wedding ceremonies. Especially difficult are cases where one or both of the candidates were previously married and divorced.

Local churches also wrestle with these questions when selecting people to serve in leadership positions. They sometimes wonder if divorced and/or remarried men and women can fill certain areas of leadership including pastor, deacon, elder, Bible teacher, etc. It is not my intention to answer those questions here, as different churches and denominations take different stands on these issues. Nonetheless, the biblical principles that apply to marriage and divorce should definitely be considered when interviewing candidates. So let's get started.

Sheila Rauch Kennedy was the wife of former U.S. Congressman Joseph P. Kennedy II (son of Robert F. Kennedy) from 1979 to 1991 when they legally divorced. Joseph Kennedy then applied for and was granted an annulment by a Roman Catholic Church ecclesiastical court. He wanted to marry his second wife in the church (it was already recognized legally by a civil ceremony). The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize divorce for any reason, so the only alternative is to apply for an annulment. An annulment is when the church declares a marriage was never really officially valid, for one reason or another, and thus is null and void. The couple is then free to remarry someone else in the church.

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In 1993, however, Sheila Kennedy (who is not Catholic) appealed the church's official annulment of her and Kennedy's twelve year marriage. She challenged the verdict saying it was hurtful to her and stigmatized her children for the church to pretend they had never been authentically married. It took ten years for the Vatican to investigate the case and finally agree she was right and to reverse the annulment decision.

The point of the above story is to illustrate the moral complexity of divorce. Evangelicals and Protestants, of course, are not subject to, nor even recognize the authority for, an extensive (and expensive) ecclesiastical legal system as are Catholics. We would agree, however, that divorce is never good, but would say that it may in some cases be necessary. Give the Catholic Church credit, it has not fallen victim to changing cultural norms but maintains the standard it has held for centuries. As evangelicals, we also must not be swayed by changing cultural norms or civil laws. We must look to the unchanging authority of Jesus and Scripture for our perspectives. That being said, most people today, including many Christians, have no idea what the Bible says and take divorce far too lightly. So, just what does the Bible say about marriage and divorce?

Question 3: Should a husband and wife who are both Christians get divorced?

The Old Testament Mosaic Law allowed divorce (see Deut. 24:1-4). However, the ancient Jewish Rabbis disagreed about how to interpret and apply that law. Those of the Hillel school of interpretation argued that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Those of the Shammai school said divorce was acceptable only in the case of the wife's adultery (in which case she

could also be stoned to death). The statute protected virtuous women from being abandoned without legal recourse, but basically they had no say in the matter of if and when to divorce.

Jesus discussed the issue in Matthew 19:3-9 when quizzed by the Pharisees. As we mentioned in Part 1, they were trying to get Him entangled in the controversy of the rabbis on the issue. As Jesus often did, He answered by asking them a question, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'?" (Matt. 19:4-5 NASB)"

The key to Jesus' answer is in verse six: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." In repeating "two shall become one flesh," from Gen. 2:24, Jesus affirmed the original definition and intent for marriage to be one man and one woman for life and should never be broken. He went on to say that divorce was permitted in the Law of Moses only because of the people's hardness of heart, but it was not God's original design.

In verse nine, however, Jesus seemed to make an exception ... "except for immorality." Scholars disagree as to what exactly He meant, but it seems He was freeing a person from the bonds of marriage if his or her spouse was unfaithful, unrepentant, and refused reconciliation. In any other case, Jesus said, divorcing a wife and remarrying another without just cause was tantamount to committing adultery (see also Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18).

The Apostle Paul, in His first letter to the Corinthians, reminded them that Jesus Himself said it is wrong for be-

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lievers to divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-11). However, Paul added, if one divorces (departs - koridzo) then the other should remain unmarried so long as possible to bring about a reconciliation. If, however, the divorcing spouse marries another, prohibiting any chance of reconciliation, then the implication is that he or she is then free to remarry (vs. 15).

In summation, the answer to question three is NO. A Christian who is married to another Christian should do everything possible to avoid divorce (even in the case of adultery). If, as all too often sadly happens, one spouse refuses to be reconciled and divorces the other and marries or (I would say) cohabits with someone else (in either case it is adultery), then the other is morally free to remarry.

Question 4: What about a case of one spouse being a believer and the other not a believer?

First, a Christian should never marry an unbeliever. As Paul says, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:13-15 NASB) Sadly, many young Christians do not obey that principle and unwisely become romantically involved with non-Christians. Often they superciliously marry the unbeliever or assume they can change him or her after the wedding. That is a possible scenario, but more often it is a tragic miscalculation. There is simply no guarantee a non-Christian spouse will accept Christ just because they marry a believer. This is also why a Christian should never marry someone of another religion or who is involved in a pseudo-Christian cult or sect (e.g. Mormonism).

Also, many times a man or woman will become a Christian after he or she has married but his or her

spouse will not choose to do so. In any case, too many Christians I have known, sadly, must live their married life not sharing life's most important matter with their spouse. Even sadder is when a believing husband or wife must bury an unbelieving spouse with little or no hope they will see them again in heaven.

Paul considered this situation also in 1 Corinthians chapter seven. In verse 12 he says that the Lord Jesus did not address this issue ("I say, not the Lord"). Nonetheless, Paul says emphatically that if a believing man, i.e. a Christian, has an unbelieving wife then he should not divorce her just for that reason. If she is content to stay with him they should remain married. In verse 13 he says the same thing to a believing wife married to an unbelieving man. The reason why the believer should remain with an unbeliever is, he says in verse 13, because it "sanctifies" his or her spouse and children.

This should not be construed to mean that somehow an unbelieving spouse is saved by being married to a believer. Rather Paul is suggesting that staying with the unbeliever allows them to live in a morally positive environment that may lead to (but does not guarantee) the conversion of the spouse and children. In any case, Paul's clear indication is that a believer should stay with an unbeliever if the unbeliever desires it.

Perhaps one other point should be made here. If a wife (or maybe the husband) is being physically or emotionally mistreated she may need to get a legal separation. Paul did not mention that option because it did not exist in his day. That choice leaves open a door for reconciliation. If reconciliation is not possible, then she may need to file for divorce. In my opinion, this does not violate the spirit of Jesus' or Paul's principles. God

does not intend anyone to be stuck in a dangerous life situation.

Question 5: What about the case when an unbelieving spouse divorces the believer? Is the believer free to remarry?

In verses 15 and 16, Paul says that if an unbeliever wishes to divorce (depart - koridzo) the believer and shows no desire to continue or reconcile, then he or she should be allowed to go. He says the believer is "not under bondage," that is, he or she is free to remarry a believer. Keep in mind that this is only when all attempts at reconciliation fail (e.g. desertion). Under no circumstances, however, is a believer justified to encourage or coerce an unbelieving spouse to divorce just so he or she can then marry a believer.

Question 6: What about the case of two unbelievers who marry and divorce?

Paul says nothing about the situations of unbelievers. He is writing to believers only. In this case we must look to Jesus' response in Matthew 19. God allowed divorce in Israel because of the "hardness of heart." God never intend divorce to occur, but, nonetheless, allowed it in Israel because they were going to do it anyway and He wanted to protect wives and children from being stigmatized.

We must do all we can to keep all families intact. Christian or not, marriage is a challenge. However we must admit, outside of Christ it is even harder for marriages to succeed. As believers we should help unbelievers as much as possible to keep their marriages intact. Unbelievers have limited spiritual resources to build lasting relationships. This is why we must present the Gospel of love and grace and seek to lead them to the healing power of Christ.

And that is the critical ingredient in this whole issue: God's grace is absolute. When a person has committed a sin, no matter what it may be, if he or she sincerely repents and places his or her faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, then that sin and all others are forgiven. Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection is able to cover any and all transgressions. We must show to those who are divorced that God forgives their sin. Divorce is a sin, but it is not a special sin in that regard. When God forgives it is total. As Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, declares, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (NKJV). People who come to Christ are then given a clean slate, regard-

less of what they did in the past (including being divorced)!

Conclusion

Marriage is a divinely ordained institution that God initiated at the beginning of the world. It is established when a man and a woman come together in a sacred one-flesh relationship (Gen. 2:24). Jesus affirmed that narrow definition of marriage as did Paul and other writers of the Bible. Christians should marry if that is God's will for their life. Likewise, if it is God's will for a person to remain single and celibate that is just as good.

God desires that all marriages succeed. The Bible indicates that two believers in Christ should not divorce unless one commits adultery or deserts his or her spouse. Even in those cases everything should be done to reconcile the relationship. If a Christian is married to an unbeliever then they should stay that way unless the unbeliever leaves and refuses all attempts at reconciliation. Though the Bible does not address it directly, even unbelievers should be encouraged to keep their marriages intact.

In all cases, when marriages are troubled we should do all we can to heal relationships. We should encourage people to put their faith in Christ and to put Him at the center of their marriages. After all, He is really the only One capable of empowering a man and woman to fulfill God's ultimate purpose for marriage: to glorify God!

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