

Biblical Reasons for Divorce and Remarriage

Luke 16: 14-18

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Stephen Davey

If you read the Old Testament law of Moses, you will come away with the impression that God's parameters for marriage and divorce are very strict. But you wouldn't have thought that if you were sitting in the synagogues in the first century in Israel. The rabbis taught that a man could procure a divorce for just about any reason he wanted. The question we need to ask is: what does Jesus say on the matter? As Jesus corrects the Pharisees and encourages His followers, He illustrates that marriage—and yes, even divorce when obtained biblically—are designed to honor God and enable Christians to serve Him faithfully.

If you've been to a wedding where the traditional wedding vows are exchanged, you've heard these words:

*To have and to hold—from this day forward,
For better or for worse—for richer or for poorer,
In sickness and in health—to love and to cherish,
Until death do us part,
In obedience to God's holy command.*

Those are solemn words; they are a commitment to seal up any back door; they are declarations that go all the way back to God's creation of marriage. You didn't get married because you fell in love, you got married because you chose to love, and your goal became to demonstrate the love of Christ for His church through your God-glorifying union. That's our supernatural goal and every so often we experience it.

The trouble with marriage is that marriage is the union of two sinners. And as sinners we happen to be really good at sinning. Besides, we're selfish sinners who want our own way. We're also individualistic sinners and we want independence. We want life to revolve around us.

One little boy was asked what made a good marriage and he summed it up by saying, “Well, she should like to watch sports on TV like I do and she should keep the chips and dip coming.” He’s going to make a great husband one day.

Adding to the selfish, individualistic nature of sinful human beings, we also entered marriage assuming that our spouse thought just we did.

Marriage was supposed to be easy. You didn’t understand why people talked about having to work at their marriages. You might even have said to your fiancé, *I don’t get all these people who talk about marriage being work; this is easy.*

And then you got married. And it wasn’t long before you men realized she doesn’t see things like you do. And you women realized he doesn’t see things at all.

You are so different from each other.

One man who’d been married for over 50 years told me one Sunday morning after the service that he and his wife were so different; he said, “We’re so different that the only thing we have in common is that we were married on the same day.”

There is something a lot worse than marrying someone different from you, and that’s marrying someone just like you. The same problems—the same lack of insights, the same shortcomings—is like an atomic bomb waiting to fall from the sky.

God put into place this unwritten law that opposites attract, and that’s because marriage will become the greatest tool of mental and spiritual development in humility and grace, more than any other relationship on earth.

A lot of marriages end because couples assume they weren’t meant for each other because they’re so different. They stop talking, they stop investing, they stop serving each other and they decide there’s probably somebody out there who understands them better.

I read some time ago about a couple who decided that their spouse would never provide the happiness they deserved. So, they each secretly went online searching for true love.

The husband soon found a woman and his wife soon found a man. They began to correspond daily. The woman’s chat room name was “Sweetie” and the man’s nickname was “Prince of Joy.” They wrote for hours, sharing with one another the troubles they were having in their respective marriages. Sweetie would later tell a reporter who was doing an article on online dating that they both had found the friendship they knew they deserved.

They finally decided to meet each other in real life, and all the arrangements were made; they met at their place of rendezvous only to discover they were already married—to each other.

Prince of Joy and Sweetie had become selfishly blinded to the relationship they already had.

But what happens when sin goes unchecked. What happens when that online relationship never stops? What happens when a spouse decides to pursue a sinful lifestyle or give their life to a sinful addiction or become harmful and abusive?

To put it simply, what happens when a spouse reaches a point where their vice is more important to them than their vows?

Is divorce biblically justified? And for what reasons?

Well, the Bible has an answer, and Jesus now dives into a subject that was as hot a topic in the 1st century as it is in the 21st century.

We're in **Luke's gospel account, chapter 16, now where we left off at verse 14**. Jesus has just finished giving a parable about the godly use of money in making friends for eternity; that is, investing our money in the gospel of Christ.

And with that, the religious leaders turn to ridiculing Jesus in **verse 14**:

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

Luke 16:14

The word for ridiculed means they "turned up their nose."

They sneered at Him, as if to say, "What do You know about managing money? You're just a poor Carpenter who grew up in little, insignificant Nazareth; You and Your disciples are all poor as dirt. What do You mean to tell us, religious leaders, what to do with our money?"

And Jesus responds here in verse 15:

"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Luke 16:15a

Jesus is teaching the principle that a reputation is who you are to other people, but character is who you are to God.

You might have a great reputation in public, but God knows what's happening in private, behind closed doors, and even behind the door of your heart.

Jesus goes on to say here in verse 16:

“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.”

Luke 16:16

You can understand that last clause passively to mean, “everyone is *urgently being invited into the kingdom of God.*”

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 661

John the Baptist is effectively straddling the Old Testament and the New Testament.

He had one foot in the Law and Prophets (Old Testament), and the other foot at the dawning of the New Testament era with his message of the Kingdom of Christ.

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor* (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 46

He was delivering the word of God to his world and Jesus says here, “You Pharisees might think you're good upstanding men, but the truth is: you're ignoring the word of God.”

How important is the word of God? ***Jesus says here in verse 17:***

“But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.”

Luke 16:17

Even the smallest dot is important. Jesus is referring to that the little serif—a little stroke, a little line which can look like a dot—that distinguishes between certain Hebrew consonants.

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 211

Just that little pen stroke, even that matters; everything of God's word—even the consonants—matter.

One paraphrase renders this, “every comma is important.”

And that's true! Language depends on punctuation and individual words and letters and tenses—even commas.

I saw a picture of a t-shirt that said on the front:

“Let’s eat Gramma!”

and then underneath it, it read:

“Let’s eat, Gramma!”

And on the back of the t-shirt, it read:

“Commas save lives!”

The difference between “Let’s eat Gramma” and “Let’s eat, Gramma” is a matter of life and death.

Which is why you’re a part of a church that has a high view of Scripture. We don’t believe the Bible *contains* the word of God we believe it *is* the word of God.

And that’s why, beloved, I am not only preaching the *Word* of God, I am preaching the *words* of God. Every word matters. For instance, Jesus didn’t say, “I am *one* way”; He said, “I am *the* way.” One little word is a matter of life and death.

What Jesus is doing here is pointing out that the Pharisees were playing fast and loose with the word of God; they reinterpreted the Law of Moses; they’ve ignored the prophets.

And Jesus is now going to bring up Exhibit A to prove their compromise and sinful lifestyle. What seems like a random statement on divorce is actually going to become an illustration where they have ignored the word of God.

Verse 18:

“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Luke 16:18

In other words, apart from adultery, divorce is not biblically justifiable.

Jesus’s response to this issue is given fuller treatment in the Gospel by **Matthew 19:9**, where Jesus states this point:

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

Matthew 19:9

So the Lord offers this exception clause of sexual immorality.

And before we dive into this “exception clause” to lifelong marriage, let me explain where Jesus is going.

In these days, there were two schools of rabbinical thought; one was the conservative school that said divorce was not allowed unless there was adultery.

They would quote the Law in Deuteronomy chapter 24 that said:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecenty in her ... he [may write] her a certificate of divorce and [put] it in her hand and [send] her out of his house.”

Deuteronomy 24:1a

The conservative school defined ***indecenty*** as adultery.

The more liberal school, which was popular among the Pharisees and the public in general, defined indecenty rather broadly. They focused more on the phrase “she finds no favor in his eyes.” never mind just the issue of immorality.

In fact, by the time of Christ, the school of Hillel—the liberal school of thought—had defined this “lack of favor in his eyes” to mean just about anything she did that he found unfavorable.

The rabbis were teaching that this loss of favor that would allow divorce could be “if his wife spoiled his supper, or spun around on the street [drawing attention to herself], or spoke to another man; or disrespected her husband’s relatives, or spoke too loudly.” And they defined “speaking loudly” as enough to be heard by the next door neighbors.

Barclay, p. 212

These actions caused her to lose favor in his eyes and he could then divorce her.

One popular rabbi went so far as to say that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman more attractive; in other words, she found more favor in his eyes than his wife did.

Ibid

So, by the time of Christ, divorce was a matter of quick and easy paperwork governed by selfish men.

Men could divorce their wives for burning the biscuits or losing their temper or simply growing older.

However, on the flip side, divorce was hardly the option for women.

In the Lord's Day, a woman could divorce her husband only if he became a leper, became an outright apostate, or was caught sexually assaulting an unmarried woman. Apart from that, a wife had no legal standing to divorce her husband.

Ibid, p. 211

So, divorce was nearly impossible for a woman, even if her husband was immoral and cruel.

What Jesus does here is clarify the Law, in the Matthew account, that divorce can take place if either spouse commits fornication.

The verb form is *pernemi*, which means "to sell" and it originally referred to prostitution.

The Latin term *fornix* referred to the arch of the pagan temple doorway; it was the place where temple prostitutes waited for customers. That arch—that *fornix*—gave us the word fornication.

James Montgomery Boice, The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2 (Baker Books, 2001), p. 402

And what's important here in the biblical record is that Jesus uses *porneia* (fornication) to provide an exception to life-long marriage.

Fornication is a much broader term than adultery, in fact it's an umbrella term for all sexual activity that is contrary to the moral standard of God's Word, and that would include incest, homosexuality, *and* adultery.

Jesus effectively says, those actions break the marriage vows and defile the marriage bed—the marriage union designed by God between a man and a woman.

Now don't misunderstand, Jesus doesn't say here, "You *have to* get a divorce because of fornication"; He says: "You may"; divorce is not *required*, but it is *permitted*.

Even the law of Moses didn't command divorce, it allowed for divorce.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell, Matthew (Crossway, 2013), p. 538

So keep that in mind: sexual immorality isn't automatic grounds for divorce, but it is certainly grounds for genuine repentance that can lead to reconciliation and forgiveness.

So in the context of **Luke chapter 16**, here's what's happening. These Pharisees were following the popular liberal interpretation of the Law which allowed them to go from one woman to another—from one wife to the next.

Marriage worked for *them* as long as it worked *for* them; but if she burned too many dinners, or talked back too loudly, or wasn't as beautiful as someone else, then he can get rid of her.

So, Jesus reinstates a high guardrail and exposes their selfishness and effectively says, “Get your heart clean; get serious; grow up; settle down; get over yourself and get back to a commitment to God’s design for marriage. Go back to your wedding vows before God.”

Now for those who are married to someone who refuses to come clean and get serious and genuinely repent, the Lord opens the door with this exception clause.

You need to keep in mind that in the Old Testament, adultery led to death and that led to an immediate release for the innocent spouse.

But as we move into the New Testament era—since the Old Testament death penalty for adultery is no longer an option, and you might be thinking, “That would still be nice”—well, it isn’t an option any longer.

The death of a guilty spouse can’t be enforced but the death of a marriage bond can be enforced with God’s permission.

Unless there is repentance, God allows divorce to release the innocent spouse to move on with their lives, perhaps marrying someone else in the future that is following God.

Now I realize a message like this brings up 300 very good questions.

So let me deal with a big question here, with the time we have remaining.

Is immorality the only grounds for a biblically justifiable divorce?

No. There are many scenarios that justify what we call a biblical—or a biblically justifiable—divorce.

And by the way, let’s make sure we understand that sin is not the basis for divorce. Sin isn’t really the issue behind divorce. If sin were the issue, we should’ve never gotten married in the first place because we were sinners to begin with. And marriage has a way, frankly, of exposing how sinful and selfish we are.

The issue is not sin; the issue is unrepentant sin—unrepentant, willful rebellion.

Divorce acts, in a way, like church discipline. We don’t discipline people out of the church for sinning. If we did, none of us would be here today. The issue that leads to discipline and divorce is unrepentant sin.

Divorce then is a severe discipline brought about by the lack of genuine repentance.

Now Jesus didn’t cover every contingency related to permissible divorce. He didn’t go into all the various scenarios and exceptions related to sinful lifestyles. Several years later, the Apostle Paul took time to fill in some of the gaps.

Paul writes in ***1 Corinthians 7, beginning with verse 10:***

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

This statement is basically what Jesus said was God's design. Marriage is a life-long commitment between one man and one woman for life—that's God's ideal.

Which means we should do everything in our power—and then in dependency on the power of God's Spirit—to build our marriages on the principles of permanency and humility and harmony given to us in Genesis 2.

So here, in this part of 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is talking about a couple that has no biblical grounds for divorce; so in this case, should a spouse leave, they are not free to marry someone else and Paul says here they should either remain unmarried or reconcile with their spouse.

Now with that, Paul changes the conversation, here in ***verse 12:***

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)...

By the way, this doesn't mean that Paul is now going to give his own opinion. It means that the Lord had not recorded this instruction during His ministry, so now at this point, Paul will be led by the inspiring Holy Spirit to give further direction to the church. ***Verse 12 again:***

If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

1 Corinthians 7:12-13

The word "***consent***" is critical here. It's a word that refers to a pleasing agreement—a mutual desire to be together.

Consent is a two-way street. That's what consent means.

And you have to imagine that these believers in Corinth have come to faith in Christ; they're new creatures; this is a new life for them; and they're innocently wondering if that

means they can divorce their unbelieving spouse, get a Christian spouse, and start over? And Paul clearly says “No.”

Which is interesting to consider that many of their marriages, even though it's between a believer and an unbeliever, one of them having been saved, their marriage can still become an opportunity to bring glory to God.

Paul goes on to reveal how their testimony may win their unbelieving spouse to Christ; and the children have a holy example in their believing parent.

So, here's the point: if there is harmonious and respectful consent that is clearly genuine, *even from an unbeliever*, don't divorce that unbelieving spouse.

Now if that's not the case, and there is not consent or there are decisions and lifestyles and addictions that clearly communicate a lack of consent; here's the exception clause:

Now verse 15:

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.

And I would insert here that the partner who is acting as an unbeliever, even if the spouse claims to be a Christian, but is acting as an unbeliever—if he separates, Paul writes further:

In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.

I Corinthians 7:15

You're no longer bound; no longer obligated to the wedding vow.

So don't fight it; don't argue about it; allow it. In fact, there's nothing that forbids you from initiating it, Paul writes here, **God is calling you to peace**. That's your goal now: to get out of an ongoing war and conflict with a sinful, defiant, unrepentant spouse.

Now Paul uses a phrase here in **verse 15**:

In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.

This is the only time in the New Testament where this phrase “in such cases” is found. It means, “In cases like these, which include desertion/abandonment.”

This phrase is an umbrella phrase for any kind of case that reveals the spouse is not genuinely repenting and not genuinely demonstrating that they desire to live respectfully and agreeably with his or her spouse.

In these cases, the innocent spouse ends up subsidizing and supporting the sinful choices of the unrepentant spouse who continually violates their wedding vows.

In his commentary on this phrase, Wayne Grudem writes that this verse could be paraphrased to read:

But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In this and other similarly destructive cases, the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Grudem goes on to write that this lack of “consent” would reveal itself in cases where the spouse refuses to genuinely repent, seek counsel, or accept the consequences.

Grudem gives a list of scenarios he believes would fit under this umbrella phrase “in cases like these”; now his list isn’t inspired, but he’s attempting to apply Paul’s words to other possible cases.

You might not agree with his list, I happen to agree with them all, but again, the issue isn’t the sin involved in this list, the issue is being unrepentant—being stubborn in choosing these vices instead of faithfully following the marriage vows:

Grudem’s list includes:

- Sexual activity outside the boundaries of marriage between a man and a woman as defined in Scripture;
- Pornography, which would be included under sexual immorality;
- Gambling, which leads to indebtedness affecting the welfare of the innocent spouse and/or children;
- Addictions to drugs and alcohol, accompanied by lying, deception, and stealing;
- Verbal cruelty destructive to a spouse’s mental and emotional stability;
- Physical abuse;
- Verbal threats of physical harm.

He writes that the abuser is forsaking their wedding vow to love and to cherish; they have instead become a threat to the other’s well-being.

So, the list of exceptions includes unrepentant immorality, abandonment and physical abuse, as well as addictions to sinful behaviors that harm the well-being of the family.

By the way, if you go all the way back to the Puritans, they always viewed physical abuse as another grounds for divorce.

In the 16th century, William Perkins wrote in his commentary on the Christian life:

Here it may be demanded what a believer should do, who is in certain and imminent danger; if the husband threateneth hurt, the believing wife may flee in this case, as if the unbelieving man has deserted her.

In other words, his abuse is equal to abandonment.

I have to say, there is a lot of debate today on this subject.

And there is, in my view, a rather tragic opinion within the evangelical church that an abused wife should endure abuse like a missionary endures persecution; that by enduring it she honors God's design for lifelong marriage.

No! Leaving an abusive spouse, leaving a wicked, unrepentant, cheating, stealing, drunken, deceitful, immoral, abusive spouse—I think I covered it all—ending that marriage, with the support the church—and this church will support you—let me tell you, that happens to be a better way to witness to our world that God will not defend a man or woman who dishonors the sanctity of marriage.

It's time for Christians to show the world what true, biblical marriages are supposed to be like, to show the world what true consent looks like. We're not perfect, but we're going to be persistent; we're committed to reveal marriages to our world that exalt the design of our Creator God.

And if you don't want to do that, then have the decency to get out of town, and leave your spouse to find someone, within the will of God, with whom they can bring glory and honor to Christ.

How do you do that? Well, just go back to your vows and begin pursuing them again:

*I promise:
To have and to hold—from this day forward,
For better or for worse—for richer or for poorer,
In sickness and in health—to love and to cherish,
Until death do us part,
In obedience to God's holy command.*

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