

I have the longest running marriage in my family for 3 generations. For the last intact marriage in my family, you have to go back to my Great-Grandparents.

When my grandmother got married, she knew my grandfather had problems. He was an alcoholic. He might have cheated on her. But he was hardworking, she loved him, and he started going to church so that made it okay. The marriage only lasted a few years. Shortly after my mom was born, he decided to divorce her and leave...he had been drinking heavily and go for days at a time and sleeping around...

As though that wasn't hard enough, when my Grandmother's church found out he was divorcing her...they kicked her out of membership. "Divorce was against God's will!" they told her, and so they couldn't condone it...even though HE was the one leaving her.

Luckily, my Grandmother, despite the hurt and rejection, stayed connected because she wanted a relationship with God more than she was willing to give in to the hurt.

That decision changed everything. I can say that we are here in this church today because of that decision.

But the pain of that moment lingered. For years she refused to officially join any church; even though she attended almost every Sunday throughout her life. Finally, in her 70's, she became a member of a church.

For years, the Church has struggled to handle the issues of divorce, and, unfortunately, they have not always handled that well. Many still struggle to present a full understanding of how to handle divorce.

Some of you have been hurt because of this. You were divorced and either someone in the church or a pastor laid a burden on you that caused you additional pain. Some of you were able to get through it, you may have felt extremely supported by the church you were attending, but you read verses in the Bible and aren't quite sure how to handle them...so you have this tension inside that irritates and nags at you.

We simply do not, once again, have time to cover everything important in this discussion. Even if we did, you need to think for yourselves. This afternoon on our Facebook page we will be publishing a link to some of the Bible verse that

deal with this issue. I encourage you to get a good commentary and read those passages and the explanations.

I also highly encourage you to get the book, **Marriage and Divorce in the Bible and the Church** by Alex R.G. Deasley. He was one of my seminary professors and wrote this as a response to much debate about how to handle divorce in a denomination that had not always handled it well.

Before we can even begin to understand what the Bible says about divorce we have to ask...

What is God's Ideal for marriage?

The reason we start here, is because we have to understand the standard, the ideal, the foundation of what God expects.

As Christians, we should practically have Genesis 2-3 memorized because of what they say about the expectations for God's relationship with humans, human relationship with each other, and why we are in the current state we are in as humans.

So Genesis 2 tells us that God created the man and quickly discovered it was not a good idea for him to be alone. Ladies, you know exactly what I mean. You leave us alone for just a moment and we find a way of messing something up.

And it usually starts with one of two things:

1. We are start thinking, "I wonder what would happen if I..."
2. One of our friends says, "I bet you can't..."

That's usually followed by someone saying, "Oh yell, hold my beer and watch this!"

So God finds he can't leave the man alone because the work is too great. So in Genesis 2:18 it says,

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

That word helper has often been misunderstood as a lesser assistant. But it actually means, "someone with strength." It is extra strength to accomplish what God asked the man to do.

The second part, a “helper **suitable**” means *equal to*.

So when we put these two together we see that God is not making someone inferior to the man. He is not making someone to be subject to the man. He is making another person as a strength equal to this person he has already created.

Why is this important for our discussion of marriage?

Because God’s original intention is best described as partnership.

God brings these two together as partners for the work he calls them to do. Two members with equal strength...becoming one unit to accomplish the will of God in a way that one simply could not do alone.

This isn’t some Jerry Maguire, you complete me, nonsense. Because the Bible shows people who are single doing great things for God. Jesus and the Apostle Paul serve as two prime examples. Just because someone is single does not mean they are “less than” or unusable or incomplete because they aren’t married. But this is a reminder whether we are single or married or divorced or whatever...we work best in relationship and with the help of others.

And after God puts them together...this relationship becomes a covenant. We might think of it as a type of contract, but it was so much more...covenants were far more strenuous than our modern contract. A covenant commitment was a commitment to faithfulness and permanence. You could get out of a contract, but it was not easy.

Genesis 2:23-24 says,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife,
and they become one flesh.

The ideal God gives us then, is two people, joined as equal strengths, in a permanent covenant, faithful relationship God’s ultimate purpose is lifelong, monogamous marriage.

The Fall damages God's ideal

But then Genesis 3 happened. The Fall has broken our relationship with God and with others. It's tentacles have reached into every area of our existence. And almost immediately the man and the woman are no longer equal partners because Adam turns, takes authority over the woman standing next to him and says in Genesis 3:20, "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living."

Adam immediately took control and damaged the relational ideal God had for this union. Cain kills Abel, Lamech engages in polygamy, and while it didn't happen immediately, sin's entrance into world meant divorce would now be a reality people had to deal with. Sin damages the our relationship with God and it damages our relationship with other humans.

So when you and I read the Bible we have to remember that while divorce is a reality expressed by the Bible it is not the ideal to which God would want us to live toward. And the Biblical Laws were not mean to condone only to regulate the damage it would cause.

Throughout the Old and New Testament...marriage looked absolutely nothing like what it does today. So in order to understand the Bible's approach to divorce we have to understand God's ideal, but we also have to understand the culture it was speaking to...because

Cultural background affects how we understand and apply the Bible's passages about marriage and divorce:

When the Bible speaks about marriage and divorce it has no concept of our modern understanding of relationships and marital practices. When the Bible addresses marriage it is speaking to a Patriarchal society where the man was in charge, the woman was an inferior with no rights and simply a piece of property, and all laws were generally established for his protection and advancement. Women were bargained for like merchandise. They were simply there to keep track of the house, prepare meals, and make babies.

While there are a few exceptions illustrated in the Bible, rarely does love and connection and choice of the participants (especially the woman) have anything to do with the marriage. It involved two Fathers, or the woman's father and the man arranging a marriage between the man, who was most likely old enough to support a family, and a young woman.

So, in this culture, divorce was a harsh thing...for the woman only. When a woman was divorced she had very little option in this culture. She could return to her father's house where she would often remain until her death. She could remarry, but with even lesser status because she was tainted goods. She could beg, or she could prostitute.

During the New Testament times it was very similar. Women were considered inferior in every aspect of life. A wife could be divorced, easily, for any frivolous reason.

This helps us understand one of the most misunderstood passages on divorce.

In Luke 16:18, Jesus says,
'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'

In that culture a man had all the power, the wife was not a legal person in a marriage, and he could sleep with any unmarried woman he wanted and it was not considered adultery, but not the woman. She was property that belonged to a man. The only reason a married man couldn't sleep with a married woman was because it was considered an act against the other man...not the woman.

I know of many women who have been victimized by the church's use of this verse. They have been called an adulteress or have struggled to understand this passage.

But when we understand this verse set in the cultural background we see something VERY revolutionary. Jesus' statement radically redefines marriage in the culture. He also radically redefined divorce. Jesus is speaking to the men. In a culture where a man could leave his wife for any reason...First he makes the woman a legal person who can be offended in a marriage/divorce procedure. Then Jesus says, "Adultery is possible for both of you, and when you commit adultery you are sinning against the woman!"

Because the law made the divorced woman an adulteress while at the same time giving her no recourse. In one quick swipe, Jesus makes the woman a legal person in this. She is someone having the "adulteress" title thrust upon her by a man with all the power. Jesus is saying, In your culture a divorced woman is an

adulteress...and I'm saying that if that is so...then you are the one who made her that way.

Let that sink in...He isn't saying she is actually in adultery. He is saying the man now bears responsibility, in that culture, for forcing a woman into a state she can do nothing about. Over and over again, when read with the cultural understanding in mind, Jesus' statements defend and give dignity and personhood to the woman.

So what about Divorce now?

We live in a different time. In some ways, we are closer to the ideal of Genesis 2 because we enter into marriage more as equals and partners than ever before. And while divorce was extremely common in the Old and New Testament, we live at a time when it not only happens, but happens often and without much disdain for it.

We hear about someone getting a divorce and we think, "That's sad! Oh, well, we move on."

As Christians, we must hold three things in tension: God's Ideal for Marriage, the Reality of our Fallen World, and the Gospel of Grace and Forgiveness.

In Matthew 19:7-9, the Pharisees come to test Jesus about his stance on marriage and divorce. If he says it is okay to divorce then He stands against God. If he says it is not okay to divorce, then he stands against Moses and the Roman government. So Jesus once again reminds them that God's ideal is something no one should separate. So the Pharisees say,

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that

anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Jesus upholds the divine ideal of a lifelong, monogamous covenant as described in Genesis 2...but then recognizes the reality of our Fallen world.

Moses permitted divorce because of one simple fact...we live in a fallen world that does not live up to the ideals of God. The challenge is not to interpret Jesus' words as another form of legalism and once again punish those who are divorced and refuse them grace and forgiveness. If we do that...we fail to really grasp the point Jesus is trying to make.

Jesus is able to hold the ideal of God in front of us while also acknowledging the reality of what will happen. He doesn't condone it, but knows that sometimes it simply cannot be avoided. This doesn't make the divine ideal irrelevant.

As Christians, as a local church we must express the divine will of God for marriage as a permanent covenant of faithfulness between two people and offer the Gospel message of grace when encountering people who are divorced or divorcing. We struggle with how to properly express this because on one hand, if we promote the ideal of marriage we risk alienating and hurting those who have divorced are in the midst of a divorce. If we emphasize God's grace, then we risk people misunderstanding and saying, "I can go ahead and divorce because God will forgive me!"

If you are divorced, you need to accept and acknowledge that your broken marriage fell short of God's ideal. Maybe it was his fault. Maybe her fault. Maybe it was both of your faults. Divorce means you fell short, and that requires you to turn to God and seek forgiveness. But it wasn't the first time you fell short and it won't be the last time you fall short of God's will.

But here is the amazing thing...God offers you his grace, his love, and his forgiveness. For some of you, divorce was not your choice. When we properly understand the divorce passages, we see God does not hold us accountable for something that was thrust upon us.

For Christians with marital problems, divorce, while it may become a reality, should never be our first consideration, and should only be sought after we have done everything possible to restore what we have.. Just because something is

allowed by God doesn't mean He condones it. And we cannot presume on God's grace just because we want a divorce.

Conclusion

I remember hearing people throwing around the verse from Malachi 2 where one translation says, "God hates divorce." I remember realizing that it didn't say, "God hates divorced people"!

We live in a world where divorce brings about a tremendous amount of harm and hurt in people's lives. Children are hurt. Homes are torn apart. There are situations where divorce is the only safe option for someone...they are being emotionally terrorized, physically abused, their children are being abused...But even these worst of divorces there is a void and a loss felt by the one hurt, and while people can heal from the pain...How much better is it to never suffer those pains? Is it any wonder that a God who loves as deeply as God loves us would HATE ANYTHING that causes us pain and separation?

Our marriages are something we should fight for to the very end.

We need to invest our time and energy into making our marriages the best relationship we have. We should grow and learn together. We should talk and stay connect...make time for each other...date each other.

One of the biggest examples of God's grace is that those who have experienced divorce can find healing, forgiveness and even find wholeness in remarriage... That is not statement that God condones divorce for you so you could find the right person...it is a testament to the grace and the power of God's ability to redeem a painful situation and bring good out of it.