

## **Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage** **Shepherds of the Sycamore View Church of Christ**

The union between a man and woman in marriage images the unity within God. The intimacy and fidelity of the marriage relationship mirrors God's own intimacy and faithfulness. As divine imagers, marriage is a sacred relationship that participates in God's own life. Consequently, we are called to faithful love as we imitate God's own relationship in our relationship with our marriage partners.

Divorce, therefore, was never intended by God. He hates divorce. It disrupts the peace, unity and harmony God originally created and intended. It violates our participation in God's life. As a result, divorce always involves sin since it entails a failure to be like God. The sin of divorce is the violation of the marriage covenant. When a couple divorces for selfish reasons they violate the marriage covenant.

However, God himself divorced Israel for her unfaithfulness and God excluded humans from the Garden due to their sin as they violated the peace and harmony of his original creation. Divorce is something that God grieves. Nevertheless, due to the hardness of human hearts, God permits divorce in some circumstances. God permits divorce when the marriage covenant has been violated.

Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 recognize fallen situations in which God permits divorce even though he never intended it. Jesus permits divorce on the grounds of *porneia* ("fornication" or "marital unfaithfulness"). The meaning of *porneia* is subject to a range of interpretations – perhaps (a) any kind of sexual unfaithfulness (including a sexual addiction to pornography that harms, abuses) and/or (b) marital covenant-breaking (including sexual involvement with another person). Paul permits divorce on the grounds that an unbeliever no longer wants to live with a believer. As a result, the believer is "not under bondage," that is, not bound to stay married or remain unmarried after the divorce.

That Jesus did not intend an exclusive exception to divorce is indicated by the fact that Paul offers another exception. Rather, both of these exceptions are employing a broader principle which Jesus and Paul apply in their particular circumstances. Neither of these texts intends to offer an exhaustive list of exceptions. The broader principle is based on a partner's obligation to the marital covenant to supply basic needs such as food, shelter and sexual rights. The broader principle that gives just cause for divorce is something like the willful and radical violation of the marriage covenant such that it substantially harms (spiritually, emotionally or physically) the other partner. Specifically, "willful and radical violation" includes not only sexual intercourse with someone other than the spouse, but addictions (i.e. sexual, drug or alcohol) and abuse (physical or mental) that harm the other partner and/or the family. When one partner willfully pursues such a course without any substantive interest in seeking help or redemption the other partner may pursue a divorce to seek safety and peace. God calls us to peace in such situations.

Divorce involves adultery. When partners divorce their spouses without just cause they commit adultery (violate the covenant) against their former partner. They have broken the covenant and that is sin.

Sin, however, can be forgiven! God yearns to forgive and renew relationship with his people. The divorced God sought to remarry Israel and renew his covenant with them. God invites and welcomes all who have sinned, no matter what their sin. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin any more than stealing, lying, or murder are unforgivable. Penitent believers will find God gracious. Repentance involves a commitment to never do it again - to never divorce again. If one is in a new marriage, repentance means renewed commitment to that marriage.

Whether illegitimately divorced persons may remarry without further sin is a controversial question. Some shepherds believe that such a remarriage would be a further act of adultery in addition to the divorce. The remarriage is itself an act of adultery. Therefore Christians who have divorced for unbiblical reasons should remain unmarried or be reconciled. Consequently, these shepherds would hesitate to counsel such persons to seek a new mate and discourage a new relationship. Other shepherds believe the adultery is the divorce, not the remarriage. In their view, marriage is never condemned in Scripture. There is no sin in remarrying. There may be times when it is better not to marry, but if one does marry, there is no sin. God never intended, except for those who are so gifted and inclined for the sake of the kingdom, for humans to be alone. Seeking a new relationship, according to these shepherds, does not violate God's intent for his creation.

Despite this diversity among the shepherds, all agree that each person must study the Scriptures for themselves, seek wise counsel, and pray for divine wisdom as they consider future relationships. Each person is ultimately accountable for their decisions before God. Recognizing the difficulty of such decisions and the diverse circumstances in which people find themselves, the shepherds of this church will neither exclude people from this fellowship nor relegate them to some kind of secondary status within the community who, after honestly seeking the will of God, decide to remarry.

The Sycamore View Church of Christ seeks to maintain the integrity of marriage and encourage commitment to marriage covenants. Divorce is a sin and has tremendous destructive power. But in some situations (as described above) divorce is the most redemptive choice. God seeks redemption, healing and forgiveness for divorced people and encourages faithful love for those in new marriages. Given the difficulties of understanding and the variety of circumstances, this community of faith is committed to love one another in redemptive ways and treat each other with respect as we promote healthy marriages, welcome the divorced and encourage the remarried.