

Intro

Considering divorce and remarriage raises a number of questions. Maybe you have a background in churches that didn't believe in divorce period. Maybe you know of people who separated for decades but remained technically married. I was in a church with a woman who was separated for 30 years and planned on doing so for life. I can only imagine she was taught divorce is never allowed. You're wondering, why are churches today letting divorced people remarry?

Perhaps your background is churches that allow divorce and remarriage for virtually any reason at all. You're wondering, why are churches so strict. Why won't they let people who are in love remarry? Where in the Bible is remarriage prohibited?

Or maybe you've discovered two exceptions in Scripture that allow for remarriage after divorce: when sexual immorality is involved and when a believing spouse is deserted by their unbelieving spouse. But you're wondering, why is that it? What about the physical abuse of a wife or child? Doesn't that matter to God? Why isn't that exception in the Bible? What if the abuser wants to remain married and hasn't committed adultery? Is the victim stuck for life? Is divorce some sort of unpardonable sin?

To some of you this really hits home. Is my current marriage biblical? What should I do if it isn't? Some are wondering, I was divorced but am I allowed to remarry?

This morning we look to Jesus and we find out that...

BIG IDEA: Jesus doesn't take divorce and remarriage casually

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Sermon Caveats

If you've committed adultery against your spouse my aim this morning is not to shame you. If you've remarried unlawfully my aim this morning is not to shame you. My goal is to help everyone who's watching to see divorce and remarriage like Jesus saw it. If you've confessed your sins to God and turned from them, and if you've trusted in Christ alone, you can rest in God's promise that your sins are forgiven. Through faith our sins are forgiven because Jesus took the punishment we deserve. If you're thinking about committing adultery you need to heed Jesus' warning! If you're thinking about remarrying unlawfully you need to heed Jesus' warning!

Behind Jesus' comments on marriage there exists a worldview framework he held: marriage is a lifelong commitment that unites one man and one woman in an exclusive union. Marriage is a good thing created by God for the stability and flourishing of the human race. What's wrong isn't marriage. What's wrong is deviation from God's very good design. What's wrong is unlawful divorce and the sins behind it.

We'll cover several passages and consider some unique scenarios at the end.

Point 1: Jesus forbids divorce and remarriage, except when your spouse commits sexual immorality against you (5:31-32)

Explanation

Jesus continues to explain how kingdom righteousness exceeds the righteousness taught and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). In 5:31, Jesus expresses how Deuteronomy 24:1 was understood by the scribes and Pharisees in his day. They used Deuteronomy 24:1 to justify their practice of easy divorce: 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found **some indecency** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, **after she has been defiled**, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

In Jesus' day, debate centered on the meaning of "some indecency." Two rabbinic schools, Hillel and Shammai, offered competing interpretations of "some indecency." The Hillel school interpreted the phrase liberally, interpreting the phrase to mean that a husband could divorce his wife for virtually any reason. Examples include if she couldn't provide children, if she had physical defects, if she burned dinner, or if he found someone more attractive. The Shammai school interpreted the phrase to mean that it was necessary to end the marriage when the wife was sexually unfaithful. In Jesus' day, the Hillel view dominated.

It is unclear what "some indecency" means. It isn't adultery because adultery required death, not divorce (Deut 22:22). In Deuteronomy 23:14, the same phrase is used to describe physical uncleanness that must be kept outside of the camp. It could be immodesty, indecent sexual behavior short of intercourse, or something else. Whatever the case, the law protected the wife. She couldn't be divorced for any reason at all, and she received a certificate of divorce that allowed her to remarry legally.

"But I say to you" triggers Jesus' correction of the interpretation held by the scribes and Pharisees. Apparently they sided with the Hillel school, divorce with freedom to remarry for any reason. So Jesus declares his stance on divorce and remarriage: "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Application

Let's clear up what Jesus is saying:

- 1) Divorce is allowed when your spouse commits sexual immorality
 - one act of adultery justifies divorce
 - the Greek word for sexual immorality, *porneia*, is different than the word for adultery and means any unlawful sexual behavior that deviates from God's design: adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, incest, bestiality, etc.
- 2) Divorce is allowed, not required, in cases of *porneia*
 - this differs with the Shammai school since they required divorce in such cases
 - repentance by the guilty party and forgiveness by the offended party is the ideal, but Jesus leaves freedom for the offended spouse to stay married or divorce

3) Remarriage is unlawful when the divorce was unlawful

- “makes her commit adultery” assumes a woman wrongly divorced will remarry, because in that culture a woman needed a husband to provide for her basic needs
- we shouldn’t marry someone whose divorce was unlawful, because that marriage would be adulterous

1) Remarriage is lawful when the divorce was lawful

Point 2: God intends for marriage to be lifelong (Matt 19:3-6)

READ Matthew 19:3-6

Explanation

In 19:3, the Pharisees ask a question: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 19:4-6 is Jesus' answer. From the beginning, before the fall, God designed the marriage relationship. In this relationship, one man and one woman would join together in an exclusive, one flesh union never to be separated. Any deviation from that opposes God's design. Jesus concludes, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

What's Jesus' answer to the Pharisees? No, it isn't lawful to divorce your wife for any cause, because God designed the marriage relationship to be lifelong. According to Jesus, no-fault divorce is unlawful and contrary to God's design for marriage.

Point 3: Moses permitted divorce and remarriage to regulate man's sin, not to sanction unlawful divorce (Matt 19:7-9)

READ Matthew 19:7-9

Explanation

In 19:7, the Pharisees ask another question: "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" In other words, if divorce isn't lawful for any reason, why did Moses command men to divorce their wives? Jesus responded by noting that Moses allowed divorce, he didn't command it. And Moses allowed divorce because of the people's sin (hardness of heart), not because divorce was God's intent ("but from the beginning it was not so"). The law in Deuteronomy 24 functioned to regulate behavior, not to approve divorce. Moses' allowance revealed man's sin, not God's design for marriage. Just because God allowed and regulated sinful practices within Israel didn't mean that he sanctioned them. For example, polygamy, slavery, etc. When God's ideal for marriage was marred by sin, God provided Israel with laws to make the best of a bad situation.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses didn't command divorce. He regulated remarriage: if the former husband wants to remarry his former wife after her second husband divorces her, the first husband is not allowed to remarry her. Jesus concludes his answer by restating what he said in Matthew 5:32. Note Jesus' purpose in both Matthew 5 and 19: to prevent unlawful divorce and remarriage.

Application

God designed marriage to be lifelong, but when one spouse commits porneia, God releases the violated spouse from their marriage covenant (see Mal 2:14). Apparently, porneia breaks the marriage bond that is normally intact until death.

Point 4: When two Christians divorce, and sexual immorality isn't involved, they must remain single or remarry each other (1 Cor 7:10-11)

READ 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Explanation

This is a marriage between fellow believers in the church because Paul is addressing the church and he speaks to a different group in 7:12, the believer who is married to an unbeliever. Paul is reiterating Jesus' instruction: "I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)." In other words, a Christian who divorces their believing spouse has no right to remarry. If a Christian wife decides to separate (= divorce) she has only two options: remain unmarried or be reconciled (= remarry her former husband). The same goes for the husband. This assumes porneia hasn't occurred. If porneia was involved, Paul would allow what Jesus allowed.

Application

Paul is targeting unlawful remarriages among Christians. A Christian wife is not free to divorce her husband so that she can marry another man. Because a Christian who divorces a fellow Christian has only two options: stay single or remarry the spouse you divorced. This appears to be a situation where one spouse initiated the divorce without mutual agreement: the wife is separating from the husband or the husband is divorcing his wife. One party is doing the action. Even the wrongly divorced spouse must remain single or remarry their previous spouse. Why? According to Matthew 5:32, the wife who is wrongly divorced is guilty of adultery when she remarries. Again, if the divorce is unlawful, remarriage is unlawful. Note Paul's purpose in this section: to prevent unlawful divorce and remarriage in the church.

Point 5: When an unbeliever is converted, and their unbelieving spouse wants out of the marriage, the believer is free to remarry (1 Cor 7:12-16)

READ 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Explanation

These verses speak to a believer married to an unbeliever. Since Paul instructs believers to only marry fellow believers, in 1 Corinthians 7:39 the wife whose husband dies is free to marry "only in the Lord," the original scenario envisions the case where someone was converted while already married to an unbeliever.

In this case, the newly converted believer should remain married if the unbeliever wishes to remain married. Because the unbelieving spouse and their children are sanctified, or set apart for God, by having a believer in the home, the believer should do their part to preserve the marriage. Staying in the marriage might lead to their spouse's salvation. However, if the unbelieving spouse is turned off by the believer's conversion and wants out of the marriage, the believer should let their unbelieving spouse depart in peace. Because "in such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved." This indicates that if deserted by an unbelieving spouse, a believer is free to divorce and free to remarry. Not enslaved (7:15) contrasts "she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband (7:11)." And not enslaved parallels "she is free to be married to whom she wishes (7:39)."

Application

So there is a second biblical allowance for divorce and remarriage: when a believer is deserted by their unbelieving spouse. If a believer divorces a fellow believer, they must remain unmarried or remarry the spouse they divorced (7:10-11). But if an unbelieving spouse separates from a believer, the believer is free to remarry (7:15). But note Paul's purpose in this section: to encourage the believer to remain with their unbelieving spouse. Because their being in the home benefits the unbelieving spouse and children. Staying married should always be the believer's goal.

Point 6: Since potential scenarios are endless, situations must be addressed case by case by applying Scripture

Explanation

One difficulty is this: Jesus taught as if there was only one exception. But Paul taught a second exception, and he considered himself in agreement with Jesus. So Jesus must assume other exceptions exist when he gave his one exception. How can we reconcile this? Jesus was addressing a Jewish debate and his instruction applied to that context. But in Paul's case a new scenario arose, believers married to unbelievers in the Gentile world, requiring a new exception.

When figuring out how to apply the Bible to divorce and remarriage scenarios, we need to remember the sufficiency of Scripture:

“An attribute of Scripture...whereby it provides everything that people need to be saved, and everything that Christians need to please God fully.” – Gregg Allison

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Every good work would include divorce and remarriage. So we must believe God has revealed everything we need to know in order to address divorce and remarriage today. Looking to Scripture, let's consider several scenarios.

Application

- 1) What do I do if I'm currently married, but it was an unlawful remarriage?

Be grieved over your sin and confess it to God. Then confess your sin to everyone affected by your remarriage. Then ask for God's blessing on your present marriage. Your marriage began with adultery, but God recognizes your current marriage as legitimate. You are not committing adultery by staying in this marriage. Repent by learning from the mistakes of your first marriage and by fulfilling your duties to your current spouse.

- 2) What if I divorced unlawfully, but my former spouse remarried after our divorce?

In this case I believe remarriage is permitted. Because restoration of the marriage is impossible and because, according to Jesus, your former spouse has committed adultery against you by remarrying unlawfully.

- 3) What if I got divorced as an unbeliever, there was no porneia involved, I'm now a Christian, and my former spouse is still unsaved and hasn't remarried?

Competing principles are at play here. You should only marry in the Lord and you should seek to reconcile with your spouse when the divorce was unlawful. We could reason that since it would be unlawful to remarry a non-Christian, the divorced believer is free to remarry a fellow believer. Or the believer could seek to remarry the unbeliever only to be rejected. In this case, they attempted to obey the Spirit of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and are now free to remarry. Or the unbelieving former spouse could actually consent and they could remarry their former spouse.

- 4) What if I'm now a Christian, but I've been living together with an unbeliever who I've never married and we have three kids together that live with us?

Competing principles at play again. You should only marry in the Lord, but you are functionally living like a spouse. The theme of 1 Corinthians 7 is stay where you are at. And I think 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 applies. My advice: marry the unbeliever because she and your children will be blessed through the union. But moving out would be lawful too.

5) What if my former spouse remains unmarried and professes to be a Christian, but isn't living like it?

If they wrongly divorced you and it could reasonably be determined they are an unbeliever, you would be free to remarry. If you initiated the divorce, remarriage would be unlawful since it would be equivalent to a believer deserting an unbeliever.

6) What if I'm married to someone who is physically abusing myself or my children, and doesn't want a divorce?

A credible argument can be made for allowing divorce and remarriage because of physical abuse: preventing physical abuse requires locational separation which approximates desertion by an unbeliever. In both cases, the one flesh relationship can't be maintained because of locational separation. Doesn't abuse require the one flesh relationship to separate? Additionally, sexual immorality and desertion are acceptable grounds for divorce because those sins rupture the marriage bond. Likewise, wouldn't physical abuse break the marriage bond?

This is a reasonable argument and there is freedom for disagreement even among our elders on this issue. But for several reasons I would counsel get law enforcement involved, physically separate, entrust the abuser to church discipline, get counseling, and seek the intervention of church members. Why? First, the default position of Scripture is that a married person is never free to marry someone else unless their spouse dies (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39). God's plan before the fall remains the ideal for us today. Second, when Jesus and Paul provided exceptions, they went out of their way to prevent unlawful divorce and remarriage. They raised the standard: you can't get divorced and remarried for any reason at all. If we make exceptions that are not found in Scripture we're heading down a slippery slope towards advocating the position Jesus and Paul corrected. If we create exceptions not found in Scripture, where will we draw the line? We run the risk of allowing what God forbids. But I concede this is a troubling and sticky issue.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many unique scenarios without easy answers. Sin makes life complicated. Divorce exists because of the curse and its effects are tragic. Therefore, restricting divorce and remarriage is a blessing.

To the married. God intends for your marriage to last until death. So guard your marriage and don't let conflicts linger that create separation. And God intends for your marriage to be a source of joy and delight where you complement one another. So work at your marriage. Spend time with one another, look out for each other, and do whatever it takes to make your marriage last. Don't consider divorce a possibility. Resolve that you are in this marriage till death.

To the single. If you were unlawfully divorced and there is no exception for you to be remarried, there is blessing in obedience. And there is companionship in the church. God will strengthen you in your calling. If you're free to marry, choose wisely. Don't be desperate. The sort of person you marry matters. The consequences are immense. Men, what does the Bible say a godly man is? Be that man. What does the Bible say a godly woman is? Desire that woman. Women, what does the Bible say a godly woman is? Be that woman. What does the Bible say a godly man is? Desire that man.