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Luke 16:18

The Certain Gospel: Divorce & Remarriage

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I think I'm a bit naive. When I chose preaching on divorce and remarriage this week I thought it would be an easy sermon. I mean I'm preaching on one verse, right? How hard can it be? Don't the majority of pastors and scholars agree about what the Bible has to say on divorce and remarriage? No they do not. The more I studied this topic the more I realized I don't know, but I'm still going to try and do the best I can to unpack what the Bible has to say about divorce and remarriage.

I also know that some of your stories included divorce and remarriage. So you may have spent lots of time thinking and praying through what the Bible has to say. After the sermon, I'm going to linger up front so if there's anyone that wants to talk further about this issue we can have a little group Q&A discussion. I admit. I don't have all the answers, but I do want to know what the Bible says. At the end of the day, whether you're married, divorced, or single, we want to obey God in every part of our lives, so we need to know what his word says. One pastor read his [sermon on divorce and remarriage](#) to his church to try and be really careful with his wording so I am actually going to follow his lead today and do the same. Together let's see what Jesus has to say about divorce and remarriage starting in the gospel of Luke.

Luke 16:18 “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (NIV®)

This verse is an interesting place to start because Jesus seems to make an absolute prohibition against remarriage after divorce. Don't do it because you'll be committing adultery. We see this again in Mark.

Mark 10:11-12 He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. 12 And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” (NIV®)

Starting with these verses John Piper and others argue that divorce is never acceptable. I'll link to [John Piper's Position Paper on Divorce & Remarriage](#) in the sermon manuscript on the website so you can read it.¹ I don't take John Piper's position. The main reason I don't agree with this position is because elsewhere Jesus permits divorce for a specific reason.

Jesus permits divorce and remarriage for sexual immorality.

In Jesus time [there was a debate](#) between a conservative school called the Shammai and a liberal school called the Hillel.² These two schools were debating the right interpretation of this Old Testament law.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because [he finds something indecent about her](#), and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. (NIV®)

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Conservative Shammai interpreted “something indecent” (ervat davar) as sexual immorality, like adultery (Deut 23:12-14). Liberal Hillel interpreted “something indecent” as “anything indecent,” or “anything I don’t like,” which opened wide the door for any kind of divorce. The Mishnah records their debate.

Mishnah Gittin 9 Beit Shammai say, "No man shall divorce his wife, unless he found in her unchaste behaviour, as it is stated [Deuteronomy 24:1], 'Because he found in her 'ervat davar' [unchaste behavior].'" Beit Hillel say, "Even if she spoiled his food, because it is said, ervat davar". Rabbi Akivah says, "Even if he found another [woman] prettier than her, as it is stated [ibid.] 'If it happen that she does not find favor in his eyes.'"³

The Pharisees actually seem to mention this debate when they ask Jesus his position on divorce.

Matthew 19:3-6 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

Jesus tells them that God designed marriage to be a permanent institution between one man and one woman for all of life, grounding his reasoning in Genesis chapter 1.

4 “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ 5 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’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

But the Pharisees press where Jesus stands by bringing up Deuteronomy 24.⁴

Matthew 19:7-8 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (NIV®)

So Jesus sides with the Conservative Shammai school. The only valid reason found in Deuteronomy 24 to get divorced is sexual immorality. But why didn’t Mark and Luke include this? Pastor Kevin DeYoung in his sermon divorce and remarriage explains that Jesus doesn’t add “except for sexual immorality” to Luke 16 and Mark 10 because “No one in Judaism disagreed that divorce was acceptable on grounds of sexual immorality. Mark and Luke didn’t have to include Jesus’ exception because they figured it was a given.”⁵

Let’s take a moment and apply our first point, “Jesus permits divorce and remarriage for sexual immorality.” So a reason we may (but not necessarily should) get divorced is adultery. If a husband or wife commits adultery by sleeping with someone else outside of their marriage this is Biblical grounds for divorce. The one who is sinned against may get divorced without sin and is free to remarry. The one who sinned and committed adultery, however, may not get remarried unless they reconcile and remarry their original spouse before their original spouse marries someone else (Matt 19:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:11; Deut 24:1-4).⁶ However, they may remarry if their original spouse dies (Matt 22:30; Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39).

This means many of the reasons given for divorce today are invalid: 1) falling out of love; 2) unhappiness; 3) one spouse just won’t grow up; 4) one person changed after marriage; 5) they had a whole bunch of credit card debt; 6) they’re sick or dying; 7) they are struggling with addiction to drugs or alcohol; 8) they are spending all of our money; 9) they don’t like your family or your family doesn’t like them; and the list goes on and on.

Although both men and women struggle with sexual immorality, I think there is a special warning for men in Matthew 5 when Jesus talks about adultery of the heart and divorce one after the other. When Jesus says “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:28) that means any man who thinks he can go to strip clubs or look at pornography and his wife can’t divorce him is absolutely wrong. That is an act of adultery even if it’s from afar. This doesn’t mean that every wife should get divorced from her husband for these sins but that an unrepentant man who continues in these sins may create Biblical grounds for divorce.

Jesus permits divorce and remarriage for sexual immorality. But is that the only reason? What about abandonment or physical or emotional abuse?

Paul permits divorce and remarriage for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses.

The Corinthian church had converts who had unbelieving spouses and some of them are wondering if they should divorce their unbelieving spouses (2 Cor 6:14). Paul says no, but there is a situation where a believer may get divorced, if their unbelieving spouse deserts them.⁷

1 Corinthians 7:15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. (NIV®)

This word for bound (doulou) implies that when you’re married you are “under restraint” and are not free to do whatever you want.⁸ So to be released from restraint means you are free to remarry if you so desire.⁹ But what does it mean for an unbelieving spouse to leave? Just like Jesus bases his teachings on Deuteronomy 24 Paul also bases his teachings on an Old Testament passage.

Exodus 21:10-11 If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. 11 If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money. (NIV®)

For a husband to abandon a wife meant to deprive her of food, clothing, and sexual intimacy. Paul seems to affirm these things in 1 Corinthians 7. Here we see several verses where spouses are to take care of each other’s physical and sexual needs.¹⁰

1 Corinthians 7:3-4 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. (NIV®)

1 Corinthians 7:33-34 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. (NIV®)

So if the nonbeliever completely abandons the physical and emotional needs of the believer, that is grounds for divorce. However, I think many people have abused the idea of “emotional abandonment” and “physical abandonment.” My husband doesn’t give me what I want so I’m out of here” or “My wife nags me so I’m gone.” Inherent within this text is that physical abuse constitutes abandonment. When a man beats a woman he is not treating her like a wife but an enemy. Although Malachi 2:16 is a very hard passage to translate we can tell God dislikes divorce and abuse and holds any man responsible if he does those things.

Malachi 2:16 “The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the Lord Almighty.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful. (NIV®)

What about if a believing spouse abandons a believing spouse? One either leaves or completely cuts himself or herself off? You’re essentially living with a housemate. The believing spouses should go through the Matthew 18 reconciliation steps. If the believer doesn’t repent, he or she should be brought under church discipline, which is the act of the church publicly saying, “This individual is not a Christian because they’re clinging to unrepentant sin.” So you’ve now been abandoned by an unbeliever, not a believer because a believer wouldn’t do that. But notice the church decides, not the individual. I can’t make this judgment on my own about my spouse. I must bring it before the Elders and the church.

Paul permits divorce and remarriage for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses. But it’s not a must.

The Lord doesn’t require divorce but desires repentance and reconciliation.

We turn again to Paul in 1st Corinthians when he shares Jesus’ words on divorce and remarriage.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (NIV®)

Just because Jesus and Paul permit divorce and there are certain situations where it’s not sinful to get divorced doesn’t mean we should or have to get divorced. The Lord prefers for husbands and wives to stick it out through the tough times which will one day enrich the good times. Marriage is a covenant we make before God (Mal 2:14-16). Marriage is not a human institution, but a divine institution God has given all people (believers and unbelievers) that shows his commitment for his people.

Maybe I’m naive but I believe that the gospel can save any marriage no matter how broken. Why do I believe this? Because the gospel saved God’s marriage. We believe in a God who has been divorced.

Jeremiah 3:8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. (NIV®) (see also Isaiah 50:1)

God had a spouse, the people of Israel, who no matter how much he loved her and cared for her she ran away and committed adultery with other nations and idols. She broke his covenant over and over again. She loved foreign powers and foreign gods more than she loved the one true God. No matter how much God reproved her and welcomed her back, she kept running to her own sins. This is why God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to purchase his people forever.

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (NIV®)

Any who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ are part of this church—the people of God. The Bible calls the church the bride of Christ (Rev 19:7).

Revelation 21:2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (NIV®)

Through the gospel God is making his own marriage new. If you think your marriage is bad, God’s spouse cheated on him for thousands of years. Even now when we’ve been saved by Christ our hearts wander and

we still commit acts of adultery against him. But there's great news here. Jesus will never divorce his bride! The day Jesus divorces the church is the day all of us can get divorced for whatever reason we want. Praise God. That day will never come.

In review, Jesus permits divorce and remarriage for sexual immorality. Paul permits divorce and remarriage for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses. The Lord doesn't require divorce but desires repentance and reconciliation. I want to take the time to apply what we've learned to different situations.

- A. If your marriage is broken and you're either thinking about divorce or have gotten divorced, God can restore your marriage through the gospel no matter how bad it is. We believe in resurrection hope. If God can bring life out of death he can resurrect your marriage no matter how dead it is right now. If both believe, it's possible. If only one believes, pray God gets ahold of the other spouse's heart.
- B. If you've been divorced for unBiblical reasons, confess this sin and receive God's forgiveness. This is not the unforgivable sin. Unrepentance is. If you are unable to reconcile with your spouse you should remain single for the rest of your life or the life of your ex-spouse.
- C. If you are divorced and are considering remarriage, make sure your divorce is Biblically permissible and that you are without sin. A good way to discern this is to explain your situation to the Elders. Let us help you and correct you if you're wrong. But also recognize that if you get remarried you are saying God won't produce a miracle in your ex's life and bring them back to God and to you.
- D. If you are considering marrying someone who has been divorced, do not rush into the marriage. Take the time to examine whether their divorce was Biblically permissible or not. If it was unBiblical, cut off the relationship immediately and do not go back to it. If it was Biblical, take the time to investigate what issues in the marriage led to the adultery or abandonment because there are two sides to every story. Know that if you marry them you make marriage reconciliation with their previous spouse impossible. If you realize their divorce was not Biblical but you still plan to marry them and ask for forgiveness later, don't do it! You don't want to start down the road of disobedience. It's a hard road to turn back from, especially after sinning in such a vital area.
- E. If you are divorced and are remarried but your original divorce was not Biblically permissible, don't divorce your second husband or wife to remarry the first spouse. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 prohibits this. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus considers even an unBiblical act of remarriage to still be marriage. Two divorces does not make a right marriage. Instead, repent of the act of adultery you committed by getting remarried and receive forgiveness. Maybe you're wondering why, especially if it's been a long time. Unconfessed sin, no matter how long ago, still has control of us. Confess, receive forgiveness, and commit your current marriage to the Lord. He will bless you for it.
- F. If you are single but are thinking about marriage one day or if you are happily married and expect to never get divorced, don't look down on those who have been divorced and never boast "I will never get divorced." Instead say, "I must never get divorced" and pray "God would you help me be faithful?" Take time to pray for the marriages in our churches and families that God would keep them strong.

I want to go ahead and end by praying for the marriages in this room. I want to pray against divorce but for repentance and reconciliation for those who have gone through it. Let's pray.

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- Instone-Brewer, David. Page 4/Reaffirming marriage.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF manuscript of this sermon at the top of this page by clicking “SAVE” and then “PDF.” For a sermon for wives click here and a sermon for husbands click here. God bless.

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¹ Piper, John. *Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper*. desiringGod. Published 7/21/1986. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-and-remarriage-a-position-paper> Accessed 7/26/2018.

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⁷ See *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.5-6 https://reformed.org/documents/shaw/index.html?mainframe=/documents/shaw/shaw_24.html Accessed 7/26/2018.

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