

## Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

### Central Bible Church

Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English literature, famously quoted “Love is blind.” Indeed, on the leading edge of a relationship, most couples are willing to overlook one another’s faults for the benefit of unity. However, soon after marriage, a husband’s and wife’s eyes are wide open to interpersonal challenges that certainly come with two imperfect beings living together for the rest of their lives. Apart from faithfulness to their vows, a commitment to God’s redemptive purposes and a vision of God’s purpose for marriage, many couples will find themselves contributing to the growing divorce statistic. The purpose of this paper is to understand God’s design for marriage, what the Bible teaches about divorce and remarriage, and provide some practical principles for helping couples navigate their marriage challenges.

### THE DESIGN OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is the earliest institution in the Bible. On the sixth day, God created a man in His image and placed him in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:26-27). Though Adam was placed in a perfect environment, possessed everything and enjoyed an exalted position among creation, he was “alone,”—a condition that God declared was “not good” (Genesis 2:18). As Adam named each of the animals, no suitable helper was found for him in creation. So God caused a deep sleep to overcome Adam and formed the woman, Eve from his rib. In this way, the woman was “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh”—taken out of the man (v. 23). Of course, God could have created woman in the same way he created man, using dust from the earth and Divine breath (see Genesis 2:7), but He created woman *from* man to demonstrate that He made woman *for* man.

In this way, **one purpose of marriage is for COMPANIONSHIP.** Husband and wives are given to each other so that neither will be alone. The writer of Ecclesiastes affirms “two are better than one” to share the successes and struggles in life (Ecclesiastes 4:8-12).

**A second purpose of marriage is to COMPLEMENT one another.** God made Adam to need another and, through Divine design, man is complemented through his relationship with woman. In other words, God brings a husband and wife together in a unique relationship that each one gives what they have to the other and fills in the other’s “gaps.” In marriage, the two are no longer separate individuals, but operate with “one-flesh” intimacy emotionally, relationally, spiritually and physically (Genesis 2:24).

Of course, a few caveats must be understood to appreciate this purpose. First, while husband and wife will complement one another, each can only be fully complete through their relationship with God who meets all of our needs (Philippians 4:19). Each spouse simply becomes an agent of grace, helping the others weaknesses and supporting their strengths. This is why singleness is celebrated in Scripture without any loss to the individual; God complements the single man or woman completely through other agencies. Second, no spouse can fully complement the other. This is why God gives us other relationships in biblical community.

**A third divine purpose in marriage is CONFORMITY.** Most spouses quickly learn of something they would like to change in their mate. Fortunately, God is in the transformation business. A Gospel-centered perspective on marriage affirms several important truths:

- God created the world good (Genesis 1:31)
- Human beings rebelled and the world is under the curse of the Fall (Romans 8:20-21)
- God sent His Son, Jesus, to redeem the world and restore creation (Romans 8:29)
- One day, Jesus will return and make all things new (Revelation 21:5)

These truths communicate a message of hope: Jesus Christ rescues a fallen world. This isn't just a spiritual principle; It's a personal reality. If a person has a faith relationship with Jesus, He guarantees that He will restore their fallen nature to become more like God's original design for humanity. Paul writes, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This means that every Christian is experiencing a daily, ongoing transformation into the image of God. This change takes place according to God's Word and by the power of God's Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). But, God uses a variety of people and experiences as His divine tools and, one of the greatest tools, is the marriage relationship. Perhaps it's because marriage is the closest relationship we have. Or perhaps it's because our spouse will tell/show us what others won't. Or perhaps it's because greater trust and vulnerability is found in marriage. Whatever, the case, God uses marriage as a conforming "chisel" to shape the individual.

The Bible speaks of this divine purpose in several places. To husbands, God commands:

*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* (Ephesians 5:25-27)

Similarly, to wives, God instructs:

*Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.* (1 Peter 3:1-2)

The result is clear: God uses the marriage relationship to shape the husband and wife into the image of God for the glory of God. Men and women become servants of God, cooperating with God in the sanctification of their spouse. The goal is not to shape one's mate into the image of *them*, but the image of *God*. God intends spouses to be the other's counterpart, not an echo.

As soon as a husband and wife understand this purpose, conflict is put in its proper context. It should be no surprise to any couple that they have each married an imperfect person, who lives in an imperfect world, who will make imperfect decisions resulting in imperfect marriage. But, as Gary Thomas rightly notes in his book *Sacred Marriage*, God designed marriage to "make us holy rather than to make us happy." If man and woman keep their eyes on the former goal, they will be better prepared for the challenges along the way.

**God's fourth purpose for marriage is to COMMUNICATE His covenant love.** The Bible describes the relationship of people to God in marriage terms. God is a "husband" to His people (Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:7), His relationship is a marriage covenant (Ezekiel 16:8-14; Jeremiah 31:32), and Israel's disobedience as adultery (Jeremiah 3:20; Hosea 1:2, 9:1). Yet, remarkably, even though God's people abandon their

affections for God and “whore” after other gods (Exodus 34:16; Judges 8:27; 1 Chronicles 5:25), God graciously pursues His people and invites them back into a covenant relationship with Himself. In fact, the book of Hosea is a beautiful (and convicting) narrative of a prophet who is commanded by God to marry a prostitute and, even though she runs after other suitors, the prophet is told not to give up on her in love.

The book of Hosea in the Old Testament sets the stage for the ministry of Jesus who came as a husband (Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29) for the church, His bride (2 Corinthians 11:2). In fact, when Jesus spoke to His disciples at the Last Supper and said,

*In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:2-3),*

He was speaking about His departure and return using marriage language. A young Jewish man would become betrothed to a girl by asking her father for permission to marry her. Then, he would tell her that he was going to prepare a place for them both to live on his father's land. When the cottage was finished, he would return to “take her to be with him” and their marriage would begin. Jesus was telling His disciples that a marriage feast was in the future (see also Revelation 19:7-9).

As God communicates His relationship to us in terms of a marriage. And, He chooses to communicate this heavenly relationship, not just by using the *language* of marriage, but by employing the *earthly example* of marriage as well. In other words, a couple's marriage is intended to become a “living parable” that declares to the world “this is what God's love is like.” This is why Paul commands husbands to love their wives “as Christ loved the church” and wives to follow their husbands in the way that the church respects the leadership of Jesus (Ephesians 5:22, 25). Because, as John Piper affirms, “Marriage is the display of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his people.” God's purpose in bringing two people together is to reflect to them, their children, their neighbors, their community and the world the greater reality of a gracious, ever-forgiving, faithful, and pursuing God.

In this section, we have considered God's fourfold purpose for marriage:

- In marriage, two people enjoy COMPANIONSHIP
- In marriage, two people COMPLEMENT one another
- In marriage, two people CONFORM one another into the image of Christ
- In marriage, two people COMMUNICATE God's covenant love

### **WHAT MAKES A MARRIAGE**

There are several elements which, together, form a marriage. It's important to understand these ingredients because, any compromise of them causes a marriage to disintegrate.

#### **One Man and One Woman**

The Bible defines marriage as the union between one man and one woman. When God chose to make a helper for Adam, He didn't create another man, but one who was “like-opposite” him. This combination of uniquely male attributes and uniquely female attributes—emotionally, relationally and physically—is what makes the “completion” of two individuals possible (Genesis 2:24). Though not all sexual intimacy between husband and wife results in children, the ability of male and female to produce offspring fulfills God's mandate to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 2:28). Because of God's design of

humanity, His mandate to be fruitful and His later commands forbidding other forms of “marriage” other than between one man and one woman, we reject homosexual and polygamous unions as a distortion of God’s original design.

### **Formal Declaration**

Just as God expressed His commitment to His people through the ratifying of a formal covenant, so a man and woman express their commitments through the declaration of marriage vows. Two cannot “walk together unless they have agreed to do so” (Amos 3:3). Marriage vows are unique to a couple above all other relationships and commitments. Because these vows are binding (Numbers 30:2; Ecclesiastes 5:1-6) and lifelong (1 Corinthians 7:39), they should not be spoken impulsively or carelessly (Ecclesiastes 5:2; Proverbs 20:25). To deliberately break this formal covenant is sin (Matthew 5:33-37, James 4:17).

### **A New Loyalty and New Community**

In marriage, a man “leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife” (Genesis 2:24). Both husband and wife step out of their submission to parents and become mutually submitted to one another in love (Ephesians 5:21). They “cleave” (lit. “hold fast”) to one another, a term implying fidelity and durability. Their relationship, and subsequent family, creates a new community and authority under God.

### **One-Flesh Intimacy**

Marriage establishes a special bond between two people. The wife’s body doesn’t belong to her alone, but also to her husband and vice-versa (1 Corinthians 7:4). As husband and wife are joined, they become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). That is, marriage is the unity of two individuals who consider each other as an extension of his or her self. This beautiful one-fleshness is physically expressed through sexual intercourse, but is not defined by it. In other words, marriage authorizes sexual union, but is not determined by it. There are multiple dimensions of this intimacy. A wife often takes her husband’s name, the two frequently join bank accounts and develop mutual friendships. They worship together, rest together, suffer together and dream together. There are even instances when longtime couples have died within hours of one another—a touching picture of their one-flesh bond.

Because sex was designed by God as an expression of the intimacy, union and oneness of the husband and wife, sex should be honorable and the marriage bed undefiled (Hebrews 13:4). Fidelity in marriage is one of the promises couple makes in their marriage covenant. Any form of sexual involvement between people prior to their wedding or involvement with someone other than their spouse after their marriage covenant is considered adultery and is sin before God.

### **Mutual Concern and Care**

God created man for woman and woman for man to “help one another” (Genesis 2:18). This “helping” benefit assumes needs and desires on the part of the other. So, each spouse selflessly and willingly gives themselves. This isn’t just a virtue of marriage, but of all Christian relationships:

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-4)*

The motivation of a person's service and love for his or her spouse is twofold: God's love for us and our love of ourselves. In 1 John 4, the Apostle explains, *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him"* (vv. 16-17). Having experienced the love for God, we possess the model and the means to demonstrate similar unconditional, unwavering, unlimited love to others. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Such love is described in 1 Corinthians 13:

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails. (vv. 4-8)*

Similarly, the Apostle Paul instructs husbands to *"love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church"* (Ephesians 5:28-29). In other words, a man or woman will always know how to care for their mate by asking "How would I want to be cared for?" Because no one wishes to ever *be* displeased, they can understand what it means to please their spouse (1 Corinthians 7:33).

These elements of marriage are important to understand and embrace:

- Marriage is between one man and one woman
- Marriage is expressed through a formal declaration
- Marriage forms a new loyalty and a new community
- Marriage creates a one-flesh intimacy
- Marriage requires mutual care and concern

### **DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

Divorce was never part of God's original design. When Jesus was questioned regarding the allowable circumstances for divorce, He answered,

*"Haven't you read...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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."* (Matthew 19:4-6)

No person should endeavor to split what God has divinely sealed. In fact, Jesus added, any biblical instruction regarding divorce was given because of hardness of hearts, but "it was not this way in the beginning" (v. 8). In other words, divorce happens because sin happened. Sin corrupted God's original design and, since the Fall in Genesis 3, couples have continued to make fallen, heart-hardened decisions regarding marriage. God "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16) because each divorce (even justifiable ones) communicates sin's contamination of the world and the false notion that there are some violations which could cause God to walk away from His relationship with people (since marriage is a Gospel picture).

Nevertheless, God concedes divorce. Nowhere in the Bible does God require or suggest divorce. But, in several passages, God does regulate it. Each of these key passages will be considered in turn:

#### **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, <sup>2</sup> and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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.*

This passage is frequently referenced to explain the process of divorce. While it is important to note that Moses established “boundaries” to prevent hasty divorces, the passage hardly offers a divorce “how to.” Several observations are important:

- The passage doesn’t explicitly state that the first or second divorce was legitimate. So we must be careful to use it as a guideline for divorce. The passage better gives guidelines for remarriage.
- The divorce decree severs the marriage. When the woman leaves her husband, she becomes “the wife of another.” So, we should not say that, after divorce, a couple is “still married” in God’s eyes.
- The problem in the passage isn’t divorce, per se, but the introduction of a third party to the marriage covenant. The original husband and wife are not allowed to remarry—even in the case of the death of her 2<sup>nd</sup> husband—because a third party had been introduced into the original marriage covenant. This is what is “detestable in the eyes of the Lord.”

#### **Exodus 21:7-11**

*“If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do. <sup>8</sup> If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. <sup>9</sup> If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. <sup>10</sup> If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. <sup>11</sup> If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.*

Initially, this passage doesn’t appear to relate to marriage or divorce at all. But, the principle of a man having one wife and then taking another—albeit a master-slave relationship—provides an important marriage principle. Two observations are relevant:

- The passage is set in the context (vv. 1-11) of master-slave relationships generally, and in the context of “setting free without payment” specifically. Thus, we learn under what conditions may a slave-wife be allowed to go free without penalty.
- The slave-wife is free from her marriage contract if her master fails to provide her with “food, clothing and marital rights.” While the specifics may be difficult to discern as they relate to modern marriages, it is clear that the master had an obligation to provide care and concern (see above) in his relationship. To neglect these basic provisions was to set his wife free from the marriage.

### **Matthew 5:31-32**

*"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.*

Among the Jews, there were two schools of thought regarding divorce, one permissive and the other restrictive. In typical form of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus narrows the cultural practice. He makes three statements in these two verses:

- There is a permission for divorce in the case of "marital unfaithfulness." The Greek word (*porneia*), means fornication, or any sexual impropriety with someone other than one's spouse. All other sins a person commits are outside their body (1 Corinthians 6:18). But the one who unites himself sexually with another person sins against himself and compromises their marriage one-flesh union through promiscuity with other person (1 Corinthians 6:16).
- The marriage covenant is violated by this adulterous activity, but not automatically obliterated. Divorce is the process of a specific, legal transaction. Thus, it's not right to say that adultery automatically divorces or breaks up a marriage. Adultery may often *lead to* divorce, but they are two separate actions.
- Spouses of illegitimate divorces risk committing adultery because, unless they remain single and celibate, they introduce a third party into their original marriage covenant. While their marriage is broken, their covenant commitment still remains intact.

### **Matthew 19:3-12**

*Some Pharisees came to him to test [Jesus]. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"*

<sup>4</sup> *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'*

<sup>5</sup> *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'?<sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."*

<sup>7</sup> *"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

<sup>8</sup> *Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.<sup>9</sup> I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

<sup>10</sup> *The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."*

<sup>11</sup> *Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.<sup>12</sup> For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."*

In this key text, teachers questioned Jesus regarding His opinion of divorce for "any cause"—a commonly held position by the liberal scholars of His day. Rather than answer their specific question, Jesus addressed the greater, more important issue: God designed marriage to be binding, permanent. The inquisitors pressed the condition allowed by Moses in Deuteronomy 24. In line with the Matthew 5:31-32 passage, Jesus limits divorce to "marital unfaithfulness" and because of the "hardness of hearts." Jesus' hearers understand that Jesus offers a narrow condition for divorce leading them to conclude that it is "better not to marry."

## 1 Corinthians 7:10-16

*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. <sup>11</sup> But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

*<sup>12</sup> To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*

*<sup>15</sup> But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. <sup>16</sup> How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

This final biblical text is helpful because it is outside of the teaching of Jesus and gives a fuller view of divorce and remarriage. In verse 10, Paul clarifies that this is revelation that he offers to which Jesus gave no specific instruction. He makes several important statements:

- Like Jesus, Paul impresses on his readers the importance of keeping the marriage covenant.
- A divorced person should stay unmarried so that reconciliation is possible. Paul is only speaking to “illegitimate” divorces because, in v. 15, he notes that a spouse “legitimately” divorced is “not bound.” That is, they are no longer under the bonds of their marriage covenant.
- A believer should not divorce his or her spouse simply because their spouse is not a Believer. In Paul’s specific context, some new Christians were concerned that their marriage would become “unholy” because of the unbelief of their spouse. Paul assures them that this is not the case.
- On the other hand, if an unbelieving partner wishes to divorce their believing spouse, Paul states that the Christian is free to allow the divorce to proceed. They did not initiate the divorce and afterward are no longer bound to the marriage requirements.
- God values the virtue of “peace” (v. 15). In Romans 12, Paul urges, “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*” (v. 18).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on God’s design of marriage and the Bible’s discussion of divorce, we may draw several conclusions:

- No marriage is perfect because no people are perfect. Couples should expect to experience conflict as they grow in godliness and strive to give themselves selflessly to meet the needs of the other.
- Every couple should continually fight for their marriage. The reality of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-12) means that every marriage will be threatened by outside forces. The Christian must be alert and stand firm in the Spirit.
- Each partner in a marriage is expected to “please” the other, not considering their own needs, but also the needs of the other: physically, emotionally and materially. They have made a vow to provide the basic necessities for their spouse and to neglect this care and concern is to miss the point of marriage.

- All divorce is occasioned by sin. This doesn't mean that every divorce is sinful. But sin on the part of one or both parties is the underlying cause of divorce. Such sin could include sexual immorality, selfishness, abuse, anger, materialism, arrogance or hatred.
- Sexual infidelity threatens a marriage covenant but does not necessarily lead to divorce. Any violator may repent and any couple may choose to reconcile. However, in such cases, the offended party has the liberty to divorce.
- A Christian may concede divorce proceedings initiated by their non-Christian spouse. They are not held responsible for the divorce in this case and are free from blame and free to remarry afterward.
- Abuse violates marriage vows and demonstrates neglect of another. No abuser "pleases another" and no one would ever wish to be abused themselves. Therefore, physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse *could* be grounds for divorce. Because the Bible does not specifically address divorce on these grounds, a couple should seek spiritual guidance in these matters.
- In the case of all divorces—legitimate and illegitimate—the couple should desire reconciliation above all things. This is what it means to live a Gospel-centered life. God has given Christians the ministry and message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21) so that they may restore broken relationships.
- In the case of biblically justifiable divorces (cases of adultery, abandonment by an unbelieving spouse or possibly abuse), the innocent party is free to remarry. In the case of unbiblical divorces (i.e., "irreconcilable differences"), both parties should remain unmarried. To remarry is to introduce a third party into their marriage covenant which remains intact before God.
- Because of the complexity of this topic, no couple should move toward divorce without wise counsel from their spiritual leaders and community.
- Because marriage is so vital to the mission of the church and the cultivation of healthy community, leaders of Central Bible Church will confront sinful patterns within a marriage in order to encourage greater commitment to the marriage vows. This discipline process is not unique to marital conflict, but all sin within the Body.
- Neither unjustifiable divorce nor unbiblical remarriage is an unforgiveable or perpetual sin. Divorcees are not "second class" citizens in the church. The grace of God prevails in these matters. And, while there might be some ministry limitations for those who have been divorced, the church must never treat divorce as unique from all other spiritual challenges.
- Maintaining grace in our response, pastors of Central Bible Church will not perform the weddings of couples who choose to remarry after a divorce which was biblically unjustifiable. Our preference, in following the mandate of Scripture, is for couples to be reconciled.