



A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO DIVORCE

MATTHEW 5:31-32

“My husband abuses me, but I could never consider divorce because he hasn’t committed adultery.” “My husband has deserted me, but he hasn’t committed adultery, so I can’t divorce him.”

Really! Is this what God wants? Is this what Jesus is saying? I know there are millions of couples who never seriously think about divorce. Their marriages just continue on through thick and thin, in good times and bad.

A Christian magazine interviewed four couples about how their marriages lasted so long—two were married 51 years, one couple 39 years, and the other couple 37 years.

I noticed something in the interviews—over and over these words were used: compromise, commitment, hard work, and willingness to allow the spouse to grow as their own person. Good stuff!

But for millions of others, divorce is a very big word (1 ¼ million a year). Luaine and I have discussed the friends we’ve had through the years, and how few of them are still together.

Today’s message is not judgmental. First, we must read the scriptures to understand God’s view of marriage. I hope to help us understand a little bit the pain and hurt a divorced person goes through.

We need to understand that the honeymoon doesn’t last forever. And that the initial attraction, passion, and emotional love will fade under the reality of day-to-day married life. And that there are no winners in divorce.

Second, I want to help us understand God’s high view of marriage, and how Christians and a church, ought to respond to divorced persons.

The wrong question to ask is, “Is adultery the only biblical grounds for divorce?” The better question is, “Why does God hate divorce?” He in fact said in Malachi 2:16 (NIV), “I hate divorce.”

For those of you who've gone through divorce, you know exactly what God means. You hate divorce too. You expected your marriage to last forever.

You have experienced the anguish and pain of divorce up close and personal. And, every one of us, through our extended families, have been touched by divorce and have seen what it does. Here are some reasons why God hates divorce:

Why does God hate divorce?

1. Life is not better after divorce

Many reasons are given for divorce—but what it comes down to is that one or both believe their life will be happier and better away from the one who made their life so unhappy. Sometimes it is—eventually. But think about this...

Divorce affects you for the rest of your life in ways you could never have imagined or anticipated. Lawyers get involved. You begin squabbling. It's not just your mate who's fighting for a share of the money—wait till you get the divorce lawyer's bill.

In all my years of counseling people concerning separation or divorce, I've yet to find anybody happy about it. Even when I know all the dirty details and believe they shouldn't be together, there is still anger, hurt, bitterness and vindictiveness.

And when it's all said and done, no one is happy with the judge's decision. There is no justice in a divorce court.

2. Your finances will be affected for years to come

There simply is not enough money to go around. Often both the husband and wife have to lower their standard of living—often to bare bones. The statistics are appalling.

Listen to these comments from divorced people: "My divorce took me from comfort to poverty." Or, "It seems that most of the support from my ex-husband goes to child care so I can work. Things are always tight, and I'm always stressed out thinking about it."

Or, "It's been hard since the divorce. You can best describe our life as 'no frills.'" Friends, if you don't think financial life after divorce isn't hard, especially for a single mom, ask them. They'll verify everything I've said.

3. Divorce never ends

There's a mythical feeling that when the divorce is final, I'll be free from this one who brought so much pain into my life. I'll be free to continue my life. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

You are still going to think about that one. You're going to ask yourself over and over, "What if?" If there are underage children you will be forced to talk to one another on a regular basis—visitation rights, vacation plans, holiday schedules, and so on.

You will be forced to ask why support payments are late, or why you have to pay support at all. At sometime or another, you will need their signature on some piece of unfinished business.

If you remarry, someday a friend or family member is going to call your new husband or wife by your former spouse's name. Believe me—divorce never ends, it just never does.

4. The children are the innocent victims

Of the 2 ¼ marriages, 1 to 1.2 million couples divorce every year. 700,000 of these marriages involve children. I have a soft spot for children. I hate to see them hurt. They are the helpless victims of divorce. Often they feel responsible.

Divorce robs them of the, "To live happily every after" dream. Because of the trauma and pain of the parents during a divorce, seldom are they really able to help their own children.

And all too often, even though it shouldn't be this way, and they should know better, it seems impossible for the divorcing parents to resist the temptation to use the children as a weapon against their former spouse.

5. Divorce affects your church and your friends

Divorce will shake your faith to its very core. Where once you were a "couple" now you're a "single." You didn't plan this. This isn't the way it was supposed to be. You may feel you don't fit in, and that no one knows what to do with you.

Divorcing your mate often means divorcing your friends. Your friends at church may change. You may feel left out. Even as you get on with your life and perhaps remarry, you remain very sensitive to topics, like today's, about divorce. You wonder what people are thinking—especially church people.

I've just scratched the surface on what life after divorce is like. There's much more that could be said. But I want to explore now how we as a church are to respond.

How should the church respond?

1. Stop treating divorce as the unpardonable sin

The way Christians often treats divorced Christians is shameful. They feel like they've committed the unpardonable sin. Well, they haven't! They didn't expect the divorce to happen.

God hates divorce for the same reason they do—it's destructive. It hurts. It is extremely painful. It implies failure. It was the death of their marriage—but unlike a physical death, there is no sense of finality, no sense of closure.

God hates divorce because so many are affected—the husband and wife, the children perhaps more so than anyone else, the parents of the spouses, the grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends—and the people in your church.

In today's Scripture, Jesus is responding to divorce practices of His day. Too often the men did not take marriage seriously. Men could divorce for almost any silly reason (burning the roast, saying something about the mother-in-law, just tired of her).

Today there's too much of, "I don't love her anymore. That just doesn't cut it. Your vows to one another were before witnesses and God. His ideal is for a man and a woman together in a life-long marriage.

Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. God hates divorce because of the hurt it inflicts. But He never hates those who divorce.

He never stops loving them. Divorce doesn't put them outside of God's love and care. And it shouldn't ours. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin!

2. Ask, "What would Jesus do?"

What do you picture in your mind when a divorced, hurting individual comes to Jesus, wanting to be loved, wanting to love again, wanting to belong again, wanting to serve again?

In my wildest imaginations, I cannot picture Jesus doing a cross-examination, ruthlessly trying to determine whether it was a 'scriptural' divorce or not.

I don't see Him trying to sort out who is guilty and who is innocent so that He can determine the penalties and rewards. Jesus would never turn His back on a divorced person, or point His finger and tell them what a great sinner they are.

Jesus would not tell them how angry God is about their divorce. He would not cast them out of the church when the church is exactly where they need to be accepted and to serve.

Let me tell you how my Jesus would respond. I see Jesus holding that person in His arms with tears in His eyes, feeling their pain and telling them to accept God's love and forgiveness. If we're going to be like Jesus, we must act like Him.

3. Become more like Jesus

He would talk about the renewal of life through Him, rather than the past marred by failure. If we are going to be a church of Jesus Christ this is where we must be. We must get down off our judgmental and legalistic high horse, and become like Jesus.

This is what the church of Jesus Christ is to be—not shutting people out, nor casting them out, nor sitting in judgment, and certainly not preaching self-righteously after the fact.

Rather we ought to be holding and comforting, and healing, and giving hope. We are the priests of God. We should be embracing, and helping in the gentle process of restoration.

We've got to see God's heart in all the Scriptures. God hates divorce because of His high view of marriage. He hates divorce because of the harm it does, because it destroys relationships and because it affects so many other people.

Ephesians 5:25-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-7 explains God's ideal for marriage: love one another, respect one another, submit to one another, and work for harmony in the family. If this is His ideal for marriage, the other side of it is that, just as He hates divorce, He also hates unloving, bickering families.

He opposes anything that robs life of its intended meaning. Make no mistake; adultery certainly is one of those things. In fact, any sexual infidelity destroys God's intended purpose.

But there are also other things such as abuse, where two people are destroying one another and the family. It could be physical abuse to a spouse, abuse to the children, or mental and emotional abuse.

Or what happens when a husband or wife abandons their family? What should the spouse do? How does that all fit in with Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3? It doesn't! And God understands that!

God doesn't hate, or even dislikes those involved. He wants them to have a full, rich, and meaningful life serving Him.

How should we respond? God hates divorce, so we, too, hate it because of the pain it causes. But rather than preach against divorce, we should emphasize His purpose for marriage.

We must call on people to surrender their wills and marriages to Christ. We must teach that commitment, compromise, and hard work, and willingness to let your spouse become their own person are all necessary ingredients to a lasting marriage. And the most necessary of all is a marriage built around the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the home.

We should be doing more to prepare our young people for a lifetime of marriage. It is more difficult to get a driver's license than a marriage license.

The church must hate divorce, but love the divorced, restore the divorced, and allow the divorced to find their place in service and ministry. This is what Jesus does. Can we do any less!

Application:

Just as God is ultraconservative on divorce, He is liberal in the matter of forgiveness and new beginnings. God unconditionally loves, forgives, accepts, and restores us when we fail. Every one of us is a sinner and fall short of God's ideal. There is no place in His church for self-righteousness by any of us. 1