

When Marriage Ends

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God loves marriage; he made it good and he made it a commitment for life. He often describes himself as a faithful husband to Israel, committed to her despite her infidelity. In the New Testament, Jesus explicitly grounds his teaching about divorce in the creation of marriage:

“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female. 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined *together*, let no one *separate*.” (Mark 10:6-9)

If we believe in marriage then we’ll hate divorce.

And yet divorce happens. Jesus notes that Moses permitted divorce due to the “hardness of hearts” (Matthew 19:8). In a fallen world, not all marriages last for life. Sometimes divorces happen and some divorces should happen. In each case the cause is sin. Sometimes it’s a single obvious sin, sometimes smaller persistent unrepentant sins eroding the marriage over time. Sometimes it’s clear both parties are to blame, sometimes it’s clearly one party, and sometimes it is predominantly one party, but with a strong minority report from the other. The marriage relationship has built into it incredible capacity for forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation; incredible but not infinite capacity.

Of course, it is one thing to acknowledge that divorce happens, but quite another to discern when it is appropriate. First though it is worth noting the language of divorce is used in two ways. Firstly, there is divorce as the final step in a process. For example, in Australia, “you need to satisfy the Court that you and your spouse have lived separately and apart for at least 12 months, and there is no reasonable likelihood of resuming married life.”¹ Here the ‘divorce’ comes after the marriage has ended. It functions like a death certificate; it doesn’t *make* anything happen, rather it acknowledges the reality of what has *already happened*. We might call this ‘recognitional’ divorce’.

Recognitional divorce makes sense of Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 7. An unbelieving spouse leaves a believing spouse, no longer willing to be married. The believing spouse is then ‘not bound’, or put differently, free to recognize the marriage has ended. However, this is very different to Jesus strong words against divorce. In Matthew 5:31–32, Jesus talks about a husband issuing “a certificate of divorce”. Among Jesus’ contemporaries, a husband could issue such a certificate for a wide range of reasons — infertility, sexual unfaithfulness, material or emotional neglect, or, for some rabbinic schools, ‘any matter’. This seems to be ‘proactive’ divorce: a real marriage is in place, but the husband issues a divorce certificate in order to proactively end the marriage. The divorce is more like issuing an execution certificate rather than a death certificate. The certificate sets out to make something happen, rather than to recognize something that has already happened.

This distinction helps us then understand Scripture’s word on divorce. It is never right to proactively divorce; it is never right to take actions that lead to the end of a marriage. However, when a marriage has already ended, Scripture reluctantly allows this to be acknowledged and clarified. Proactive divorce is a sin. Recognitional divorce is telling the truth about the impact of sin that has already occurred.

Paul reinforces the words of Jesus,

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband... And a husband must not divorce his wife.” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

The simple message is don’t divorce. When we get married we commit to a lifelong relationship, and we should do everything possible to honour that commitment, even when our spouse hasn’t been faithful to us. Unfaithfulness may well end a marriage but it doesn’t always have to. And if we manage to rescue a marriage in such circumstances, then we’ve been a little like our heavenly Father, who remained faithful to a faithless people.

¹<http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/family-law-matters/separation-and-divorce/divorce/divorce>. Accessed 5 July 2020

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul highlights how important marriage is; even if a Christian is married to an unbeliever they should stay married if the unbeliever is willing to do so (v12ff). It is only when the unbeliever is not willing to be married that the Christian is 'not bound'. We think the key word is 'willing' (v13). Marriage starts when we agree to be married. This should be for life, but it is impossible to be married to someone who refuses to be married, and so marriage ends when one or both spouses no longer agree (or are willing) to be married. This doesn't mean a marriage ends when someone in a flash of anger says: "I don't want to be married", but rather when there is a permanent unwillingness to remain married. In such cases the Bible reluctantly permits us to acknowledge that there is no longer a marriage. This will change the questions we ask when a marriage is in trouble. We won't ask "Would you like a divorce?" or "Am I allowed a divorce?" Instead we'll ask: "Is there still a marriage here?" or "Can this marriage be rescued?". This does not mean the task is simple. Determining when a marriage has ended is difficult.

Two types of circumstances pose a particular challenge. Firstly, when someone declares they are willing to be married, but their actions show they have no commitment to a real marriage. In Titus 1, Paul notes some 'claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him' (v6). Similarly, some claim to be willing to be married, but by their actions deny it. They want the word 'marriage' attached to their relationship but not the reality that goes with it. But when we ask whether a marriage exists, we are investigating the *reality* of the situation, and not simply the words people might like applied to their relationship. In such cases, while they are saying they agree to be married, they are not actually agreeing to be married.

A different challenge occurs when someone is unable to agree to remain married. Sometimes the hurt and damage caused by sin is so extensive that the relationship cannot be rescued. The wronged spouse may even at some level desire reconciliation, but due to the hurt are simply unable to do so. Christians may be suspicious that this person is just avoiding a difficult path (and indeed some may be) but we must not underestimate the impact of sin. Some damage is too great to be healed in this creation.

Divorce is messy. Our capacity to hurt each other is barely limited by our imagination, and our capacity for self-deception is likewise great. As such, it is better to take decisions with the help of others. In fact, the opportunities for the people of God to help marriage are extensive. We can:

- prepare each other to be married;
- model a culture where getting help in the early stages of difficulty is welcomed;
- call each other to repent;
- offer special assistance as marriages end, including helping clarify when marriages have ended
- mourn the end of a marriage, and
- care for those who are divorced, both victims and perpetrators.

We are anticipating that the help can be provided through both the formal structures of the church and through the generosity and wisdom of God's people acting as they have opportunities presented to them. We suspect if God's people (formally and informally) were better able to help marriages, then perhaps more marriages could be rescued.

In all this we should remember firstly, the Bible's call to honour marriage. Our instincts and efforts should be devoted to rescuing marriages. And when we can't rescue them, we won't cheer, but rather weep. We know it is a concession, and never part of God's plan for marriage. And so, when it comes to divorce, compared to the society at large, Christians will be slower, more cautious, looking for signs of life where none can be found. Our society feels a little anguish and rushes off to the divorce courts. We won't rush. We won't end marriages – not ever - we won't even end unhappy marriages. But sometimes we'll have to notice — reluctantly, slowly — that a marriage has ended.

Secondly, we'll also remember the world is fallen, and be reminded again of the good news that Jesus Christ has died to reconcile us to the Father, and we'll long again for the new creation when there will be no more tears and the healing not possible now will be given then.