

Marital Issues

This is one of the most sensitive subjects to talk with someone about, but it is important that you know what the bible says about marriage and divorce, so you don't give advice that goes against what God says is right. Divorce is commonplace in America today. Although the divorce rate in the USA skyrocketed from 1965 to 1980, culminating in the infamous statistic that 50% of marriages were failing, it's been on the decline since. As of 2018, it is now down to 41%.¹ This decline may result from the fact that many getting married today grew up in the shadow of divorce. Young people are waiting longer to get married, cohabiting before marriage, and fewer are marrying at all. Still 41% is incredibly high and we should expect that Christian marriages would do considerably better. Sadly, a 2008 survey found that the divorce rate within Christianity is about the same as the country in general.² "With few exceptions American Christianity has simply capitulated before the divorce epidemic that has swept the nation over the past thirty-five years."³ With all of this in mind, it's imperative that we keep an open mind to what scripture says, rather than squeezing the bible into the mold of our culture.

The Biblical Ideal

Genesis 2.18-25

- עֵזֶר *ezer*: helper, every other place *ezer* occurs in the Torah, this refers to God (Gen 49.25; Ex 18.4; Deut 32.38 (false gods); 33.7, 26, 29)
- נֶגֶד *neged*: fit, that which is opposite, that which corresponds

Mark 10.2-9

Romans 7.1-3

Matthew 22.30

Ephesians 5.22-33

1 Corinthians 7.1-5

Divorce

Deuteronomy 24.1-4

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "National Center for Health Statistics: Marriage and Divorce," January 20, 2017, [cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/marriage-divorce.htm)

² Barna Group, "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released, March 31, 2008, [barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released](https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released)

³ Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: 2003), p. 272.

Helping Hurting People Session 7 – Student Notes

Matthew 5.31-32; 19.9

1 Corinthians 7.8-16

Conclusion

Most divorces today are probably not for these biblical reasons:

1. adultery (Mat 5.31-32; 19.9)
2. abandonment by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7.15)
3. abuse (inferred from “such cases” in 1 Cor 7.15)

Other reasons divorce occurs might include:

1. My spouse is lazy and forces me to do all the work and support him/her
2. I’m not happy; my spouse makes me miserable
3. I’m not sexually gratified; my spouse is unattractive now
4. We fight all the time; I can’t stand to be around him/her
5. We are so poor and in debt because s/he foolishly spends all the money
6. S/he can’t have children; I wouldn’t have married him/her if I knew this
7. I’m in love with someone else; I deserve better
8. My spouse is holding me back from fulfilling my dreams

With the noted biblical exceptions, we should by default be on the side of the marriage, trying to help people fix their marriages rather than pursue divorce or infidelity. Good books that you may find helpful include (1) Timothy and Kathy Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, (2) Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect*, and (3) Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages*.

If divorce has occurred from a believer (outside of biblical grounds) then your advice should be in line with 1 Corinthians 7.11, namely, to remain unmarried or be reconciled to the spouse. If you’re working with the person who was wronged in a righteous divorce, then there should be no stigma or blaming the victim. In fact, the church should rally together to support him/her. However, if the person you are talking with caused the divorce, encourage him/her to repent and seek forgiveness. Divorce is a big deal, but it is not the end of the world.

In all cases, being a good friend means showing love and support as someone starts to put their broken life back together. Encourage him/her to come to church regularly, go to a home fellowship or small group, and develop platonic relationships with godly people. This is especially key if the marriage caused him/her to isolate. S/he will need time to process, time to figure out life, and time to heal. Holidays can be especially difficult after divorce. The family of God can step in in a huge way to bind up the brokenhearted and nurture those who are wounded back to health.

Appendix: Legal Grounds for Divorce in New York State⁴

There are seven grounds, legally acceptable reasons, for a divorce in New York State:

1. irretrievable breakdown in relationship for a period of at least 6 months
This ground is usually called a no-fault divorce. To use this ground, the marriage must be over for at least 6 months, and all economic issues, including debt, how the marital property will be divided, and custody and support of the children have been settled.
2. cruel and inhuman treatment
To use this ground, the Judge will be looking for specific acts of cruelty that happened in the last five years. It is not enough that you and your spouse had arguments or did not get along. The cruelty must rise to the level that the Plaintiff is physically or mentally in danger and it is unsafe or improper for the Plaintiff to continue living with the Defendant.
3. abandonment
To use this ground, the spouse must have abandoned the Plaintiff for at least one year or more. Two examples of abandonment: where the spouse physically leaves the home without any intention of returning or where the spouse refuses to have sex with the other spouse, this is called "constructive" abandonment.
4. imprisonment
To use this ground, the spouse must have been in prison for 3 or more years in a row. The spouse must have been put into prison after the marriage began. The Plaintiff can use this ground while the spouse is in prison or up to 5 years after the spouse was released from prison.
5. adultery
To use this ground, the Plaintiff must show that the spouse committed adultery during the marriage. This ground can be hard to prove because evidence from someone besides the Plaintiff and spouse is needed.
6. divorce after a legal separation agreement
To use this ground, the Plaintiff and Defendant sign and file a valid separation agreement and live apart for one year. The separation agreement must have specific requirements included to be valid.
7. divorce after a judgment of separation
This ground is not used very often. To use this ground, the Supreme Court draws up a judgment of separation and the married couple live apart for one year.

⁴ New York State Unified Court System, "The Grounds," Domestic Relations Law § 170, nycourts.gov/courthelp/Family/divorceRequirements.shtml

Marriage, Divorce/Separation

A word to the wise: Do not attempt to do marriage counseling unless you are a professional therapist or trained minister.

Practical skills in helping a person be a better spouse:

Rules to abide by: Do not work with both spouses and help only the spouse that is the same gender as you. As with any conversation you are having, your goal is to listen to and come alongside the person to be emotional support and help the person make his/her OWN DECISIONS.

Never give advice. Never give advice. Speak the Word of God in love.

NEVER:

- Work with someone of the opposite sex, especially when there are marital problems. You are NOT the exception.
- Be the “go between” – talk with one and relay messages to the other or take sides.
- Try to intervene if there is violence or abuse. Instead, help the person to get to your pastor/professional care immediately, and others if needed such as the police, Unity House, or a battered persons’ shelter, depending on the seriousness of the violence. Safety is primary.

When working with someone who is going through a divorce or is divorced, most likely you would be addressing depression and anxiety issues, anger and grief.

Those suffering from marital issues will generally have financial problems and if there are children, they will need support with the children. Be responsive with church and community assistance (i.e. food pantry); believers that can help with housework or yard work; watching children, etc. These efforts need to be coordinated with the church. Launching out on your own is not a good idea at all. We as helpers need to make sure we are doing no harm and involving our pastors and counselors.

Work with the person concerning Scriptural issues that come up. Be ready to give food for thought and consideration from the Bible as pertains to the situation at hand.

Use all of the techniques we have discussed so far (open and closed questions, clarifying questions, use of silence, reflective listening/positive personal regard). Be supportive but personally neutral in any issues the couple has. Again the Word speaks for itself.

If you have personal attachments with the people involved or unresolved divorce issues yourself (i.e. guilt, emotional pain, financial suffering, estranged children), refer the person to someone else. We cannot mask these pains and hurts when we are working with someone who has the same or similar issues. It is literally the blind leading the blind. This is not anything to be embarrassed about. We all have situations that we are uncomfortable with and others are not so distressed with the situation. No one is better or worse than the other in this. We support one another and where we have strengths we shine and where we are weaker, we work on it and get healing and deliverance ourselves so we can help others.

Use reflective listening to help the person “hear” what he is saying, thinking and feeling. This skill is non-judgmental, non-combative and helps the person to really focus on what it is that he is actually thinking and feeling.

Helping people to remember something good about the person (i.e. he has been a good dad to the kids, or she has always supported me when I had work difficulties). Try to help the person focus on what has and is currently working. Encourage doing more of that successful thing. Of course encourage the spouse to promote prayer together and spending time with each other having fun as a couple without the children.

Assist who you are helping to prioritize marriage issues. Adapted from: “I’m Not Happy in My Marriage” Christian Counseling Today, p.55

- Prioritize your marriage. Genesis 2:24 – Your children will not be with you forever. They go on to build their lives. Your marriage is what you will enjoy long after the kids are out of the house.
- Prioritize quality couple time. It is very advantageous to make time to connect at least 15-20 minutes a day, take time for the 2 of you once a week, and take an annual trip – just the two of you. Ministers especially need to take this very seriously. All can get lost in the custodial work of life and leave a very important human relationship – marriage – to thrive on its own. It does not work for long. Solomon 7:11-12 the Shulamite bride invites her busy, shepherd king husband, Solomon on a romantic trip. Planning an alone time 4 – 6 months in advance gives you something to look forward to and plan for.
- Have a healthy support system. Keep people around to speak words of wisdom to you from the Word. If your work is not supportive of marriage, make special changes so that does not wear down the marital happiness.

Encourage young couples to do the SYMBIS (Save Your Marriage Before It Starts) pre-marital assessment. Mary Ann and Jerry are trained facilitators. If someone else would like this training, let me know.

There are programs within some churches that do an excellent job of working with couples before they marry. They mentor them with a newlywed couple, a couple with children, and an elderly couple for a year. They go through counseling and a class on marriage and personal relationships, finances, parenting all from a Biblical perspective. They are given opportunities to serve together in the church to learn how they work together. Preparation for marriage is very important. Understanding that this decision stands for the rest of a life is vital.

Practical Skills:

Fred: I can't stand it that I can't see my children because of what her lawyers are trying to do to keep me away.

You: Because of what her lawyers have done, you aren't able to see your kids which is devastating to you.

Fred: Yes, just because I forgot to pick them up at school once. I had to work late and was tired and headed home on auto pilot.

You: Sounds like getting caught up with work and being so tired causes you to forget other important things. What are some things you have done or your wife suggests that will help you to see your children more often?

Or

Because you forgot to pick up the kids, they are really nailing you with this.

Or summarize:

Your wife's lawyers are keeping your children away from you because of one mistake of not picking them up at school due to work constraints.

At this point, the conversation has a lot of different directions to go. Depending on the person and situation some suggestions could look like this.

Some things that you might bring up are: What can you do from now on not to have that happen again; Prayer works, what specifically are you praying for?

Remember you are not a pal or best buddy when you are helping. You are coming alongside a person that you and God love to help the person see through the pain and trials to behave like Christ in the situation and dealings with the spouse. Again, use baby steps with people. We are tempted to feel like we want to just shake people because we think they need more of a "come to Jesus" meeting to wake them up. Not a sound idea at all. Keep your emotions out of it.

Helping people needs to be done within the context of your prayer about the situation and asking a pastor or counselor for help in dealing with the situation appropriately. If you are going to err, err on the side of caution and get help yourself in what to do to assist. These are people's lives and we represent Christ. We want to do no harm.

Community Group setting: In a group setting, have two individuals be a care-giver and the other one needing care. Using the scenario that you are given, please do a roleplay. After a few interchanges ask for input from the group on how questions can be stated differently or possibly different techniques that might work at that time.

1. Woman has been divorced for several years and still is angry at ex-spouse. She is telling you of how he will not let her have the children on Sundays to take them to church.
2. A woman (or man) is wanting to get married and has doubts as to whether this is the right one. (You don't happen to like him.)

3. A spouse is upset that the other spouse is jealous of friends at work and constantly is asking about them and looking at texts.
4. A 19 year old man or woman is living with someone instead of getting married. S/he asks you what you think.
5. Or a scenario of your own that you suggest.

Mary Ann Yaconis is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Mary Ann Yaconis' Personal Meeting Room

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