

Consider These 6 Truths Before Signing Divorce Papers

Jesus died to redeem mankind. Therefore, whenever we apply the Scriptures in a way that is unredemptive, creates hopelessness, or reduces a person's destiny to their history, we have missed the point of the gospel. This can pose a few challenges when the church has the responsibility to love people in messy situations, without championing choices that God is not in favor of. (Might I add that when God tells us not to do something it's because He loves and wants to protect us.)

The challenge with speaking to the body of Christ about divorce is convincing divorced people that they are forgiven and blessed without giving people in a tough marriage permission to quit! But what I have to say today is that I'm concerned that in our zeal to keep marriages together (a good and valid thing to do), we have completely marginalized an entire people group, who, by the way, are often really hurting. We've marked divorced people as our modern day lepers. I'm not okay with exiling a third of the church to the ice castle because they've failed before. I feel so strongly that we need to work this out as the body of Christ and redeem anyone who has been through a divorce!

Please Don't Misunderstand

I do not think divorce is "OK" and I'm not at all saying that if you're in a hard marriage that you should give up. I love marriage and have been happily married for over 42 years. Please hear me! My son went through a divorce and it was one of the most painful experiences my family has ever been through. So I personally understand that when God says we shouldn't get divorced, it's because He wants to protect us

from pain. When God says “no” there’s always a reason. So let me be clear:

1. I am totally against divorce! Kathy and I have been married for over 42 years. Marriage is a covenant you make for life.

2. Marriage isn’t something you try out to see if you are compatible. Marriage is something that you work at every day because you made a covenant; you came into this relationship to lay down your life for one another.

3. Psychologists say that divorce is the second most stressful thing that you can experience in life, ranking just below the death of a child.

4. Getting divorced because you are not “happy” usually begins a descent into a pit so deep that it takes an act of God to recover from.

5. My son went through a divorce and it nearly destroyed him, his children, and Kathy and me. I laid on my couch for six months depressed and unable to function. The stress caused my son to have MS-like symptoms for four years, and most importantly, it did untold damage to my grandkids. Thankfully, eight years later, we are all recovering. Thank Jesus!

6. When God says things like no, or don’t, it’s always because sin hurts people. God is not trying to control people or He wouldn’t have given us a free will or provided choices (like planting two trees in the garden).

So the idea that I would ever do anything to promote divorce is ridiculous and insulting. I have spent my life helping to save marriages, restore relationships, and teach people how to live in covenant with joy and peace.

Now that you understand I’m a huge fan of marriage, we have to take a look at how we treat those who fail at it. We’ve all failed at one point of our lives. In fact, half of the Bible

was written by murderers, and yet God still uses and redeems people who fail!

Is There Hope After Divorce?

In some church circles, divorce is equal to the unpardonable sin. People who have been divorced are treated as if they have the plague: they can't serve in the church and they are not trusted. But having suffered through a divorce in my own family, I have a very different perspective. Let me begin to process my thoughts on divorce with you:

There Are No Easy Answers

Here is the challenge: there are millions of people in the United States alone who are divorced and remarried. In my first three years as a pastor at Bethel Church, I was our primary marriage counselor. I averaged six appointments a day, three days a week for all those years. I began those years with dogmatic, black-and-white perspectives on many issues, but especially on marriage and divorce. The problem was that my simple, theological perspectives, were irrelevant to many of the complex situations that I found myself trying to resolve.

For example: John and Beth get divorced for unscriptural reasons. Years pass and John remarries and has two kids with Ann. Meanwhile, Beth remarries Tom, who is also divorced and her ex-spouse is remarried. Now Beth and Tom end up in my office with serious marriage problems and, oh, by the way, they have had two biological children since they have been married for a few years. What does forgiveness and repentance look like for them? How can they lay a foundation to start fresh?

Do I tell them any of the following?

1. You are both committing adultery. Ask God to forgive you. But you also need to understand that God won't help you restore your relationship because you both have sinned against heaven so you will live the rest of your lives without the blessing of Jesus on your relationship.

2. Or do I say the two of you must ask God to forgive you and bring forth fruit of repentance by divorcing each other? The only marriage God can bless is your first marriage; therefore you must either convince your original spouse to divorce their spouses and reconcile with you. Then we will help you figure out how to integrate your two children into your families by sharing joint custody.

3. Or do I say the two of you must make things right with God because you're living in adultery? Therefore you need to get a divorce and share custody of your children.

4. Or maybe my fourth option is to say there is no godly solution to your problem. No matter what the two of you do, you can never be blessed even though you're forgiven. You both messed up and you must live with it!

This is just one very common scenario that I faced weekly as a counselor and pastor. If you think that this is rare then you haven't done much counseling. I learned in my counseling that it's easy to have dogmatic answers to problems that you don't really have to solve! Unfortunately, the world is much more complex than what a single principle will solve.

Are We Telling People That Cohabiting Is Better Than Marriage?

Let's continue taking a look at how we approach divorce.

If we say you can't remarry after divorce, do people who live together instead of getting married have an advantage?

If Steven lives together with four different people over 15 years, and then finally decides to settle down and marry, the church celebrates him and the fact that he finally gets it! He isn't met with shame and judgement, but rather relief and celebration! But why can't we apply this same celebration to someone who tried really hard to do the right thing (get married instead of just living with someone), who failed (like we all do and have) and then wanted to do the right thing and do better the second time around and get married again? Do you see the double standard here?! When Christians can't find a rule in the Bible that applies to a situation they often don't know what to do!

So What's the Answer?

Jesus has an answer for every situation. There's no person, no relationship, no situation that is so bad or so complex that He cannot create a redemptive solution out of that leads to joy and peace! That is, if people are repentant and humble. If we can't find the answer in black and white in the Bible, we have to go back our core values of who God is and start thinking about the heart of God! He's a redeemer! He came to make beauty from ashes!

If you've ever been divorced, I bless you and say you're forgiven, and that mercy and grace are flowing into your life right now. I release you from anything you're holding onto from the past. I apply the blood of Jesus to you, whether the sin was against you or whether you were the one who sinned, and say that you are now cleansed and made new. You're not a leper. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin! And If God can use murderers to write the Bible, certainly He can forgive and recommission divorced people!

If you've never been divorced, I want to challenge you to repent from any judgment you've carried in your heart, and ask God to help you gain His perspective on divorce. Let us be the

kind of brothers and sisters who love, welcome and champion our family into the freedom and redemption that Jesus paid for us all to have!

I know this is often a tricky subject to talk about, and I don't pretend to address the whole situation in one blog post, so I want to encourage you to check out the messages I preached on regarding divorce. You can see them for free here and here with your account. Or, you can check it out on my podcast.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments! {eoa}

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