

How to Know if Your Painful Marriage Qualifies You for Divorce

Jesus said that even though it was not God's original design for marriage, divorce is "allowed" in some circumstances "for the hardness of your hearts" (Matt. 19:8). For the Christian believer who takes Jesus' words seriously, what does that mean? How bad do things have to be in order to leave your marriage? How do you know if you are released from your marriage—in God's eyes?

This can be a slippery area. Legalistic religionists have held the verse "God hates divorce" over people's heads and created much pain and destruction. Others have focused on "God is love" and concluded that if love is gone from a marriage, it's time to leave. Both are distortions of God's view of marriage.

I have not been divorced, but I've seen it relatively up close. I married a man who had been divorced. People in my family have been divorced. I've walked with friends through a divorce. There's nothing easy about this. Without pretending to have all the answers, this is an attempt to respond to those who ask me whether their painful marriage "qualifies" for divorce.

Society and laws aside, here's the bottom line when it comes to your heart and soul:

God is the only one who can release a person from a marriage.

There are times He does that. When Jesus spoke of "the hardness of your hearts," He was referring to both husband and wife. God can and does restore anyone and anything where He is given opportunity to do so. He can and does restore marriages even after abuse, addiction and infidelity, as well as all

manner of “smaller” problems.

But God can only do His restoring work if He is given the opportunity. And in that, both you and your spouse get a vote. You cannot vote for your spouse. And while you cannot know your spouse’s heart as God does, you can prayerfully discern and observe. And you can make sure that *your* heart is giving God every opportunity to do what is needed.

God hates divorce not because it offends His heavenly sense of rightness or because it goes against some heavenly list of do’s and don’ts. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin, and it does not relegate you to second-class citizenship in the kingdom of God. God hates divorce because it hurts His children!

Here’s something I know to be true:

Divorce Will Not Solve Your Problems

Divorce will not solve your loneliness, unhappiness, sexual frustration, anger or codependency. Getting a divorce will not make the pain go away. It will not guarantee a happy remarriage. (Statistically, more second or third marriages fail as compared to first marriages.) Divorce will hurt you and tear you in two. It will affect your children for the rest of their lives.

If you divorce because someone else—a friend, a relative, society or the church—tells you that you “can” or “should,” you will carry regrets forever. If you leave because your needs are not getting met, you’ll wonder why you’re still unhappy. Though society’s laws are important and need to be followed, only God can release you from your marriage in your heart.

So how do you know if your marriage is bad enough to leave? Based on what I read in Scripture, here are some things that do not “qualify” for divorce, and a few that *may* “qualify.”

Reasons to and not to Get Divorced

Marriage is not for the purpose of making you happy or getting your needs met. It's for the purpose of learning to love well. And most of the time, we only learn to love well when we go through challenges.

There are plenty of reasons a marriage may be unhappy:

- Poor communication.
- Frustrations around sex.
- Differences in religious beliefs (See 1 Cor. 7:12-15).
- Conflict over money, in-laws and so on.
- Falling "out of love."
- Your spouse doesn't meet your needs.
- Feeling unloved.

Do these issues cause problems in marriage? Yes. But remember, divorce will not solve your problems. Divorce may change some of your problems to different problems, but it will not solve them. Most of the time the healthiest thing to do is face the problems, change where you can, and give God the opportunity to transform your marriage.

And yet there are times a marriage cannot be saved—not because of any lack on God's part, but because one or both parties involved do not give God the opportunity to do His work. The "big A's" may indicate circumstances where this is the case:

- Adultery.
- Addiction.
- Abuse.
- Abandonment.

Let me be clear; God can and does restore marriages where these big issues are present. It's not the presence or absence of any of these problems; it's whether your spouse's behavior is actually destructive. And it's about whether or not the people involved are giving God the opportunity to do His work

in their lives.

How Do You Know?

So how do you know if God is releasing you from your marriage? Only through serious prayer, where you put your own feelings aside and, in deep quietness, listen for God's voice. Here are a few questions to consider in this regard;

1. Have you given God full permission to do His work in you?
2. Is your spouse willing to let God work in their life?
3. What is God's perspective on your marriage?
4. Whom does God need you to be to your spouse in this season?

That last question can be tough, but it's perhaps the most important one. Does God need you to back off and give Him time to work in your spouse's heart? Does He need you to change something in your own behavior for the benefit of your marriage? Does He need you to lovingly pursue your spouse? Or is He releasing you from your marriage itself?

Regardless of your prayerful answers to these questions, the journey forward will be difficult. You will need God's grace whether you go or stay. If He does *not* release you from your marriage, He will give you the wisdom and grace to be the husband or wife He needs you to be to your spouse in this season. If He *does* release you, He will walk with you through the difficult challenges ahead and into the next season of your life.

Get alone with God. Get quiet. Acknowledge your feelings and then put them to the side. Once your heart is still, listen for God's voice.

And then repeat, again. And again.

That's the only way you will know whether you are released

from your marriage.

Your Turn: *Has your marriage been painful? Have you wondered whether you should go or stay? Have you sought God's perspective on your marriage? What has that been like? Leave your comment below.* {eo}

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This article originally appeared at .