

On My 38th Anniversary, Let's Talk About Divorce

The oldest brother of Jesus Christ and the leader of the first Jerusalem council, James, was called a “pillar” in the church (Gal. 2:9). He was also selected by God to give us this very wise and practical advice: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19, NIV).

When a couple is beginning to entertain thoughts of divorce, they usually spin in the opposite direction. As matters escalate, it isn't long before papers are being signed, family and friends take sides, and the date in court comes and goes as another marriage dissolves.

If you or someone you know is headed in this direction, can we push the pause button and ponder some things before it's too late? It does take humility, but the Lord also inspired James to caution, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6, NKJV). If there's one person in all the universe you don't want opposing you, it's God!

As my wife and I are approaching our 38th wedding anniversary, we'd like to share some thoughts regarding divorce. No need to quote the dismal statistics in our nation today; let's just take a look at it from God's viewpoint and see if we can discover some solutions.

Now, if you are reading this having been through a divorce, don't succumb to condemnation but rather reflection. Were you an unbeliever? Were you in a backslidden state and have since returned to God? If you did not have any biblical grounds for divorce, have you thoroughly repented and consecrated yourself to obey God without reservation? Have you learned the lessons God wants to teach you in your journey as you pursue a fresh

start?

If you're currently married to an unbeliever, please jettison thoughts like "How can I get out of this?" and replace them with God's Word, which says that unbelievers "may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives" (1 Pet. 3:1, NIV). This applies to a man with an unbelieving wife also.

Finally, in all that follows, remember that believing prayer is critical. The words "Everything is possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23) come from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ, not Dr. Phil or Oprah. We have seen miracles of marriage restoration—even couples remarrying each other after divorcing!—when Christians humbly submit to God rather than erratic emotions and irrational thinking.

A Biblical Worldview on Divorce and Remarriage

There are three biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage:

1. Ongoing and unrepentant adultery (Matt. 19:9).
2. Abandonment by an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:15), which speaks to actual physical and long-standing desertion (and some would also add persistent physical abuse/violence that reveals "breaking faith"/abandonment of any semblance of true faith) as grounds for separation and later possible divorce. "'I hate divorce,' says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'because the man who divorces his wife covers his garment with violence.' So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful" (Mal. 2:16).
3. A former marriage with subsequent divorce as a non-Christian: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV).

Yes, there sometimes is a legitimate and biblical basis for a divorce. Yet this fact does not mean they're a first recourse or an easy way out of a situation where God is endeavoring to

mature our character as we submit to obedience rather than convenience.

God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), but there is something He hates even more: adultery. This is why He allows it as grounds to nullify a sacred marriage covenant. God hates divorce, not divorced people, because of what divorce does to men and women and children and families and a nation and a generation. It's like when we say we hate cancer, but we don't hate people with cancer.

In our society, we've trivialized and minimized divorce. It's a sad reality that it has become an acceptable solution to a couple's difficulties in marriage. What God is calling us to do is to change our mind about divorce as well as stop advising it as a quick way out of the problems couples inevitably face in marriage.

When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus regarding divorce and Mosaic law, He answered that divorce was permitted because of the "hardness of [their] hearts" (Matt. 19:8, NKJV), but He renewed the original standard by saying "it was not this way from the beginning" (v. 8, NIV).

A Christian marriage is different than what the world puts forth as its concept of marriage. God's design for marriage is not like high school dating or a contract to be dissolved when the going gets tough. God ordained marriage as a covenant—a sacred and binding vow between one man and one woman with God at the center for all of one's life.

Marriage is not intended to be a 50-50 proposition. The biblical view of marriage is giving up one's self 100 percent for your husband or wife. Contrary to what much of our society believes, love is not merely a fleeting emotion or sexual attraction but an unselfish choice for the greatest good of the other person.

When my wife and I entered into a marriage covenant 38 years

ago this April 10, we stood before a thousand people and declared our intention to enter a covenant marriage. The message given by the minister focused on the elements of a covenant, and we exchanged our biblical vows, one of which was "Divorce is not an option."

Almost 13,870 days later, in spite of incredible adversity, trials and challenges, we're still happily standing together to the glory of God! Never once in all of those years have we ever even uttered the word *divorce* to each other in the midst of our probably thousands of conflicts.

We are bound together by God and by our vows that were made in the presence of a multitude of witnesses. In the face of massive problems, we have simply drawn upon the grace of God, obeyed the Scripture on how to resolve conflicts and done our best to never let the sun go down on our anger, as the Bible instructs (Eph. 4:26). And when we've had times of extreme tension, being in the midst of what felt like a nuclear war, we humbled ourselves and drew upon trusted, mature Christian friends to whom we are accountable to help us break through the impasse to victory. (Thank you, Lane and Maggie!)

We hope you will follow our example. It's not that we are special. We are simply mutual servants of the Lord and one another who desire to honor God in marriage and our family. In the very core of your being, isn't that what motivates you?

My wife's parents have been married for 68 years! Among their eight children and their children's children, there are 17 marriages and yet no divorces. Why? We simply adhere to the biblical pattern.

Not long ago, my wife and I sat down and counted the married family and friends we have been close to in our lifetime. Of approximately 140 couples, we discovered there were a number who lost their spouses to death but only one who has gone through a divorce. I don't say this to impress you but to make

the point strongly that these folks align with the Word of God on marriage and by His grace walk it out, reaping the success resulting from obedience. Isn't that what you want?

Christian marriage is not the absence of conflict but the overcoming of it. If you can stand the pull, God will pull you through. But will you submit to Him and His Word or succumb to your emotions when the heat is on?

Someone once asked the late Ruth Graham if in her marriage to Billy Graham she ever thought about divorce. "Divorce? No. Now, murder ... ," she chuckled.

Remember, love is not primarily a feeling. It is an unselfish choice for the greatest good of the other person. So if you are tempted to say, "I don't think I love my spouse anymore," then it's time to turn things around by forgiving and learning to love that person biblically.

A number of years ago, I sat in my living room with Gary (not his real name), who said he was going to divorce his wife because he didn't feel he loved her anymore. Because I had the privilege to sit under the teaching ministry of the great guru of all counselors, Jay Adams, I knew exactly what to do.

After explaining to Gary that biblical love for his spouse was not predicated upon fleeting emotions, I shared with him the verse where husbands are commanded (not suggested) to love their wives (Eph. 5:25). Gary promptly told me he didn't "feel" he could do that.

So next, I reminded him that God commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves and that his wife was obviously his closest neighbor. Again he quickly retorted that he didn't "feel" that was still possible.

Finally, I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Gary, God even commands you to love your enemies! If that's how you are currently viewing her, you still have no escape route."

My brother really was trapped. He either was going to learn to love his wife whether he felt like it or not or choose to disregard God's Word and suffer the inevitable consequences, which I'm sad to say he did.

If you or someone you know is facing the temptation to throw in the towel and just get a divorce, will you take some time to step back, reflect on what's been said here and ask God for the grace to do whatever is necessary to preserve the marriage? If you will honor God and His Word, He will intervene in ways that will amaze you!

Let me conclude by quoting from a newsletter published a number of years back by Dr. James Dobson when he was leading the Focus on the Family ministry. He shared the results of a scientific study entitled "Does Divorce Make People Happy?" conducted by the Institute for American Values. The findings were noteworthy because they "debunked the modern myth that someone in a troubled marriage is faced with a choice between either staying in a miserable relationship or getting a divorce to be more happy."

This study revealed "a full two-thirds of the unhappily married spouses who stayed married were actually happier five years later. Among those who initially rated their marriages as 'very unhappy' but remained together, nearly 80% considered themselves 'happily married' and 'much happier' five years later."

The newsletter went on to say, "Surprisingly, the opposite is found to be true for those who divorced. The Institute for American Values study confirmed that divorce frequently fails to make people happy because, while it might provide a respite from the pain associated with a bad marriage, it also introduces a host of complex new emotional and psychological difficulties over which the parties involved have little control. They include child custody battles, emotionally scarred children, and economic hardships."

As my wife and I prepare to celebrate a special event in our lives, we invite you to follow us as we follow Christ in covenant marriage. Perseverance really does pay off! Remember, Jesus Himself told us that it is those “who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Luke 8:15).

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