

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Most of us have lived our lives taking marriage for granted. From the time we were children we knew about marriage, heard about marriage, read stories about marriage, but never gave a second thought to the institution of marriage. Where did it come from? Whose idea was it? Is it really necessary? Rarely did we ask those questions as kids. Rarely do most of us ask them as adults, until our marriage is in crisis. Marriage is so foundational to living that we never give it a second thought. It is just there, until we are faced with committing to it or getting out of it. Then it becomes an all-encompassing issue.

Most of us have little understanding about the magnitude and importance that an institution like marriage holds in society; not just American culture, but societies throughout the world. There is a reason for this: it was God's idea. That's right, marriage was God's idea. In fact, the Bible teaches us that it is not only foundational to people and societies, it is His model for how He views His relationship to those who love and know Him, His church. **Ephesians 5:21-33** is the New Testament picture of marriage God's way. In it we are told;

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless."

This is God's view of marriage. It's something we do, and something He does with us. It is a totally encompassing relationship and foundational to society's wellbeing. It is God's structure for building people and nations. Believe it or not, every culture and society on earth rests on this thing we call marriage. Without it children lack what they need to flourish, women struggle to find their way, and men often don't grow up. If you are among the 50% of people who were married and have experienced divorce you may say, "You can have it; I don't need it again." The truth is, God designed this life in such a way that without marriage we would live in chaos. I can hear some of you now: "I am married and I am living in chaos!" Please know that I get that, I do understand. After 30 years of pastoring, I have, unfortunately, seen it all: the good, the bad and the really ugly marriages. Bad marriage is not fun, but good marriage is literally heavenly. It fulfills all the longings of the human heart because God set it up that way.

In the garden, at the beginning of time, marriage was God's idea. We are told in **Ephesians 5:31**, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This statement came first in the garden. It is a quote from the creation story in **Genesis 2:24**. It was spoken at the beginning of time because it was foundational to all people. Love it or hate it that is the truth.

I am often challenged today about the issue of homosexual marriage. There isn't enough room in this paper to tell you why God made men and women as He did, with predesigned differences that can be filled only by the opposite sex, but that is what He did. He designed marriage to meet needs He left in the human heart, needs that only the opposite sex can meet. So, marriage as God intended is clearly between a man and a woman, not a man and a man, not a man and three women or a woman and two men. The text is clear: "*A man shall leave his parents and cleave to a woman.*" **(Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5 and Ephesians 5:31)**

The original wording also makes it clear that God's intention for marriage was permanence. The word "cleave" is the Hebrew word "dabaq." It means to be loyal, to stay in. The reason God did this is

obvious to anyone who works with human hearts and relationships. We humans don't build relationships that are deep and intimate without security. That is what God had in mind when He created marriage, intimacy and safety. It is here that the human heart thrives and gets life. *"Cleaving"* in this verse also alludes to sexual intercourse, the most intimate act God gave to people. It is the seal of the marriage; something you do with your spouse and no one else. In fact, in the Old Testament the act of intercourse outside of marriage was seen as such a deep violation of people, that committing adultery was listed as forbidden in the Ten Commandments; carrying with it the sentence of death. **(Deuteronomy 22:22)**

The permanence of marriage is such an important issue to God that before the fall of man, marriage would never end. After sin and all the damage it brings entered into human relationships, marriage suffered as well and God did as He always does: He worked with people who are less than perfect. In fact, Jesus was challenged on this very issue in **Matthew 19:3-9**;

"Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Jesus' answer to the question begins with the obvious emphasis on permanence in **verses 4-6**. He then states that because of the hardness of human hearts Moses permitted divorce. Moses never commanded it as they stated but he did permit it. Jesus continues by speaking to the severing of the marriage by the act of adultery. He sees it as such a deep violation of the marriage covenant that it was a "deal breaker." It severed the relationship in the spiritual realm. However, scripture is clear, when the spouse chooses to forgive, this rupture can be healed. It is supernatural and only the Holy Spirit can do this healing. It includes every facet of the human heart, but at its root it is a spiritual violation because marriage is a spiritual event. So, biblically speaking there are two clear ways to end a marriage: death and adultery.

It is apparent to most people that divorce is a crushing event. It tears at the fabric of the heart. That is why God said in **Malachi 2:16**, *"I hate divorce."* He didn't say, I hate people who divorce, but I hate what divorce does to families and children. Those of us who work in the marriage arena are keenly aware of the very painful experience for everyone involved. At the end of the day the truth is, marriage is tough to work through and many of us, unfortunately, are searching for an "escape clause."

Let me speak to your heart for a moment please. It would be wise for any of us who are in the throes of a marriage struggle to remember Jesus never divorces us when we are unfaithful. His love is never ending and His desire is for our hearts to be the same. That doesn't mean you can't feel vacant and even hopeless in your marriage at times. What it means is that when you do feel like quitting, your first response is to bow your heart and bend your knee to your Saviour, the One who can and does heal what seems to be hopelessly fractured. He, more than any of us, has experienced unfaithful human hearts throughout time and history. He has never left or forsaken His own, but He regularly experiences us abandoning Him.

We are blessed to live in His security. It is worth noting studies conducted over 20 years; with hundreds of couples now bear this out. When we tough it out in difficult times there is a fruitfulness born out of those times that make sticking in the relationship worthwhile. In fact, those couples were indeed

found to be far happier than those who chose divorce. (See John Gottman @ University of Washington Study involving 2000 couples for 20 years. They found that only 19% of divorced people were happily remarried after 5 years, and of those who chose to stay in difficult marriages, 80% were happy 5 years later.)

There is one more issue that is often brought up when divorce is discussed; the issue of abandonment or desertion found in **1 Corinthians 7:10-15**. Christian separations are dealt with in **verses 10-11**. Paul states that separated Christian couples are to remain unmarried or reconcile. **Verses 12-13** deals with a situation in which the husband or wife, one or the other, are unbelievers. The believers are instructed not to send the unbeliever away. **Verse 15** is the key verse in this text. It states, *"Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace."* Frankly, what Paul meant when he wrote this is not entirely clear. What is clear is that in Jesus' previous teachings, desertion is never spoken to. When addressing dissolution of the marriage union (**Matthew 5:32-19:9**) and the lack of divorce (from God's perspective) desertion is never mentioned. I must summarize then that Paul's position on desertion and Jesus' lack of a clarifying statement does create a difficult and very grey area in regards to divorce and remarriage. At Water of Life we handle this situation on a case to case basis.

So, who can divorce and who can biblically remarry? The widow can remarry and those who have been violated in a marriage that was broken by adultery can divorce and remarry. But where does that leave the vast majority of people who divorce due to "irreconcilable differences?" Jesus would be the first to say that those touched by divorce have been wounded and are in need of healing. It was His words that strike such a deep picture of human hearts when He said in **Matthew 5:8**, *"Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way."* Hardness of heart has killed many marriages. I think it is safe to say selfishness is at the root of nearly all divorce, but God is a healer and a redeemer. Forgiveness is His idea. Grace abounds for those who repent, who turn away from their selfishness and turn to a living, healing God. Jesus forgave the adulteress woman (**John 8:1**) and we are commanded in **Ephesians 4:34**, *"And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."* I believe if God can remove our sin "as far as the east is from the west" (**Jeremiah 31:34**), then I believe there is room in His economy for grace to remarry those who have sinned and truly repented before Him.