

RELATIONSHIP RESCUE

Dealing With Divorce

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Divorce is never simple or easy. Many lives in this room have been touched by divorced. Some of you have been divorced. Perhaps all of us have family or close friends who have experienced divorced. Or you may be a child of divorce.

So many voices address this topic, from so many different points of view and different value sets—it's confusing! I'm not going to quote Oprah or Dr. Phil. Instead, I would like to begin today as a brief introduction to the subject, by looking at the view of divorce expressed by the Son of God, Jesus.

In Mark 10:2-12, Jesus was challenged by religious teachers with the difficult issue of divorce. *“Now some Pharisees came and tried to trap Jesus with this question. ‘Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife?’ ‘What did Moses say about divorce,’ Jesus asked them? ‘Well, he permitted it,’ they replied. ‘He said a man merely has to write his wife an official letter of divorce and send her away.’ But Jesus responded, ‘He wrote those instructions only as a concession to your hard hearted wickedness. But God’s plan was seen from the beginning of creation for He made them male and female. And this explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them for God has joined them together.’ Later when He was alone with His disciples in the house, they brought up the subject again and He told them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery.’”*

We can learn three things from this passage about divorce, from Jesus' point of view:

1. Divorce breaks God's heart. Jesus pointed out that marriage is not merely a contemporary social construct, or, as some would look at it, an outdated idea, but something that God Himself planned before humans were created. Too often, people see marriage only from the human perspective. If they have ever known it, they have forgotten that a marriage is not sealed by a piece of paper or by human law, but by God. Leaving God out of the equation, makes divorce appear a simple and convenient option. Yet to separate a divine bond like that is impossible to achieve without the pain or hurt of ripping or tearing apart the two that were united as one.

2. Divorce is allowed in cases of adultery, abandonment and abuse, but not required. Jesus clarified that although there were circumstances in which divorce was permitted, it was never

God's ideal, but was permitted only because of the hard heartedness of one or both of the people involved.

How does a heart become hardened? Through the deceitfulness of sin.

You might want to study Matthew 5 and I Corinthians 7. These passages talk about divorce, in the context of adultery, abandonment, and abuse. Although you should always separate yourself from a marital situation that is physically dangerous, I would encourage you, even in that context to continue to pray that God would produce repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This would qualify as one of those instances Jesus referred to, when He said, *"These things are impossible with men, but with God, all things are possible."*

3. Do whatever is possible to avoid divorce. You can't control the heart or the actions of your spouse, but you can decide to do whatever is possible to avoid divorce. My wife and I have struggled many times in our forty years of marriage. And many times we have had to renew our commitment to one another and to God. So today, as we examine five critical decisions for dealing with divorce, I challenge all of us to recommit ourselves to God and to His principles for married life. His ways are not always the easiest, but they are always the best, and always remember that they ultimately flow from His great love for us.

Statistics show that the divorce rate in America is hovering right around the 50% mark. That means for every two weddings that take place this year, another marriage will end in divorce. Statistics also show that one out of every four Americans is a child of divorced parents.

I hope to address two audiences today. The first is those of you for whom divorce might be a possibility. Maybe you are struggling in your marriage and you are asking yourself if you married the right person. Maybe you are thinking about hitting the eject button on your marriage and starting over with someone else.

Also included in this group are those of you who are not yet married, and those who may be happily married at present, but in the future will face marital difficulties. You will have to decide for yourself what you believe about divorce and whether or not to end your marriage because of problems.

The second audience I will address today are those who have already been scarred by divorce. You may already have ended your marriage in divorce, and are now struggling to piece your life back together. Or maybe your parents divorced and you still carry the hurt and scars that their separation produced.

You see, divorce, or the prospect of divorce, could feel like very deep waters that threaten to drown you. But there is good news: God wants to reach into our lives and heal the effects of divorce. He wants to rescue us from the impact of divorce.

Our key verse for this sermon series is found in Psalm 144:7: *“Reach down from heaven and rescue me. Deliver me from deep waters.”* That’s a good prayer to pray when you’re dealing with divorce.

This morning, we are going to consider five godly decisions that we can make that will help protect our marriage from a future divorce and will help heal us if we have already experienced divorce.

Decision #1: Commit to a forever view of marriage. One common complaint, often cited as the reason a divorce is necessary, is “irreconcilable differences.” Irreconcilable differences are not a Biblical reason for divorce. In fact, irreconcilable differences are common to nearly every marriage. Irreconcilable differences are simply points on which you agree to disagree—neither party will be persuaded by the other to a different point of view. That could be anything from believing that peas are best eaten from a spoon, instead of a fork, to believing that the draft from an open window causes illness. Usually, however, they revolve around how to discipline children and how to spend money. Still, they are not an excuse for divorce.

Marriage is not a trivial commitment. It’s a forever commitment.

Jesus made it clear in the passage I read from Mark 10: *“Since they are no longer two, but one, let no one separate them for God has joined them together.”* (Mark 10:8-9)

You need to make up your mind now, before you get married, or before your marriage reaches a crisis point, that divorce is *not an option*. If you marry someone who does not share that view with you, I promise you, instances and situations will arise that will tempt you to hit the eject button, or to claim an escape clause and quit the marriage.

In every marriage there are times when you will wish you weren’t married—at least, not to the person that you are presently married to. If your spouse turns to you and says, “Honey, I tell you, there hasn’t been a single moment since we were married that I wished I wasn’t married to you,” I’d be careful, because they probably lie about other things as well.

Is there such a thing as a true soulmate—the one person out of seven billion that is a perfect fit for you? That really depends on what you mean by “perfect fit.” Usually, we mean emotionally comfortable and free of friction—someone who reads my mind and dotes on fulfilling my every felt need.

I once had a problem with my feet, for which it was recommended that I buy orthotic inserts for my shoes. I did, and with regular use of those inserts, my feet improved significantly. The inserts were perfectly fitted to my need. But, were they comfortable? Not at all! It felt like I had large smooth rocks in my shoes.

You see, if by “perfect fit” you mean someone perfectly suited to you as you are right now, and who will grow in the same directions and at the exact same rate as you, then it becomes apparent that you have your head in the clouds! Such a person would soon become predictable and boring, not fulfilling.

We actually grow by challenges, not by coddling. But those same challenges also have a dark potential. If we do not meet them appropriately and effectively, they could overwhelm us.

Forces will come from within your marriage, that may push you to the breaking point.

Forces will come from outside of your marriage, that threaten to divide you.

You need to prepare yourself to face them and work them through—with God’s help, and as necessary, the help of others.

Is there a Mr. or Miss Right? For sure! But you must understand this: they were not born that way, nor do they come that way, any more than you do. You have as much potential of becoming Mr. or Mrs. Right for the person you marry, as they do of becoming that for you. But it will take God and persistent attention and work. This I can say for sure: Once you are married, the person you have married is your Mrs. Right or your Mr. Right. And it is now up to you to be that for your spouse.

Most of us know that $1 + 1 = 2$, but in God’s mathematics, when it comes to marriage, $1 + 1 = 1$, because two people become one.

Decision #2: Deal with problems proactively. The most effective way to deal with divorce in your marriage is to prevent it. The old adage is certainly applicable here: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28, “*You’ve heard that the law of Moses says do not commit adultery, but I say, anyone who even looks on a woman with lust in his eyes, already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Jesus was teaching that what’s going on in your heart, what’s going on in your mind, *is reality*. And the thoughts, and especially the thought patterns, that you choose to think about deeply affect all of your relationships.

“*As [a person] thinks in his heart, so is he*” (Proverbs 23:7).

“*Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise*” (Philippians 4:8).

The first thing to do, even before you get married, is to commit yourself to follow the principle that God has given in His Word to only date or marry someone who is also a believer—someone who is a faith match. You see, to follow Jesus means to make Him and His will for you the master priorities in your life. If you marry someone who has a different master priority, even though it might be something good, your lives are going to be moving in different directions, as you each pursue your master ideal. You will either move further and further apart, or one of you must surrender what is most important to you. Neither of those outcomes is a healthy one.

Then, once you are engaged, go to premarital counseling. Pre-marriage counseling will help insure that you and your fiancé(e) are agreed concerning some of the foundational principles of a Biblical marriage.

After you marry, it is important to continue to date your spouse. It is too easy to begin to take your spouse for granted, so make up your mind to invest your energy to keep romance alive in your relationship.

Those of us who are married, need also to defend our marriages from temptation. You need to guard your thought life. Don't allow yourself to fantasize about someone that is not your spouse in a romantic or sexual way.

Another way to proactively deal with marital issues is through post-marital counseling. I have friends who tell me they go to a marriage conference every year, whether they need it or not. That's proactive. That's preventive. If you have tried to resolve issues in your marriage and you have been unsuccessful, getting Biblical guidance from a trained counselor could be a tremendous help to you.

Decision #3: Do whatever I can to reconcile. This means even the little things, the little fights and disagreements, because they add up. You need to be the first one to admit that you are wrong and ask for forgiveness. Even if you were 99% right, and just 1% wrong, say, "Honey, I was wrong. I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that doesn't happen again. Will you forgive me?" And then, leave it. Don't add, "Honey, don't you have something that you would like to say to me?" Just ask forgiveness for your part and leave it. You may need to talk through some issues, but do that later.

I know one couple who had been divorced for more than a decade when recognized God's desire for their reconciliation, and you know what? They remarried. They recommitted themselves to one another and to God's plan for their lives.

Romans 12:18. It says, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* Would you underline that phrase, *"if it is possible"*? See, God says you have a part for

which you are responsible. You can't make anyone else do what is right. But you can do your part.

If you have been divorced, and your ex-wife or ex-husband has remarried, you have to move on. But you can still make the decision to do whatever you can—not to remarry, but to reconcile. It's going to be worth the effort. On a radio program, I heard about a study of couples who were seriously considering divorce. They were surveyed during that crisis moment in their marriage, and they were interviewed again five years later. Some of them had divorced and some had worked to stay together. Here's the interesting fact that the study uncovered: Those who chose the hard work to stay together rated their lives as happier than those who had divorced. If it's possible, it is worth the effort.

Decision #4: Break my destructive patterns. "Scott, what's going on?" He was just 31 and struggling in his marriage—his fourth marriage— possibly looking toward his fourth divorce. "What's going on?" His words were unforgettable. He said, "Man, I think I just keep marrying the wrong girls."

What would you say to that? Do you think there might be a pattern here? Or did those girls all marry the wrong guy?

Have you thought about looking at yourself in the mirror to see if you have any bad behavior patterns?

Here are the hard facts. Those who have already been divorced are much more likely to divorce again than those who are married for the first time. And if you are a child of divorced parents, statistics show that you are over 50% more likely to get divorced than a child of parents who stayed together their entire lives.

What those statistics *don't tell us* is that if you have already been divorced, or your parents divorced, that your relationships are doomed, that you should throw up your hands and give up, that it's hopeless. That's *not* what the statistics say.

They do say this: they suggest that there might be relational patterns in your life that you have developed or that you have seen in your parents and are likely to mimic, that could damage your marriage, if you don't do something to break those behavioral habits.

Albert Einstein gave us this definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. If I've been divorced, then before I even think about entering another relationship, I need to look in the mirror and see what patterns or habits I may have that contributed to the dissolution of my marriage. And the best mirror to use is the Word of God (James 1:22-25).

In Jeremiah 8:4-5, God said, *“When people fall down, don’t they get up again? When they discover they’re on the wrong road, don’t they turn back? Then why do these people stay on their self-destructive path?”* In other words, why do they keep doing the same destructive things over and over again.

Divorce happens. But divorce is rarely (if ever) just one person’s fault. We need to examine our relational patterns before we ever enter into marriage. We need to examine them during marriage, in order to improve it. And especially if we have experienced divorce, we need to examine our relational patterns.

Proverbs 26:11 uses graphic language to make its point: *“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his foolishness.”*

Are you acting like a fool? Are you continuing to date or fall in love with people who are not suited to you? Do you frequently criticize the person you’re married to? Are you expecting too much from your husband or wife, instead of being satisfied with the person that God has formed them to be? Do you have anger issues that always enflame arguments? Do you make a big deal about minor issues? Are you overly suspicious or overly clingy for no good reason? Maybe it’s because your parents didn’t trust each other, and now you have a hard time trusting other people. Or is there a pattern in your life to hold onto grudges, hold onto hurts, and refuse to forgive people? Look at your life.

Decision #5: Trust God to bring healing and hope. Divorce has a lot of negative emotions attached to it—like guilt and shame and fear and regret and anger. But divorce is not the unforgivable sin. It’s not the one thing that, if you do it, God will throw His hand up in the air and say, “Well, that’s it! No hope for you. No future for you.” That’s not how God responds to divorce in your life, and anyone who tells you so is misrepresenting Him.

God is not the source of guilt and shame in your life. He is the source of healing and hope. God specializes in new hearts and in fresh starts. And even when it seems like you’ve hit a brick wall or reached a dead end, with God there are no dead ends. There are only new beginnings.

Psalm 147:3-4 says, *“[God] heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds. He counts the stars and calls them all by name.”*

These verses tell us several important things. They tell us that God is all-knowing. God knows when our hearts are broken. There is no point to pretending with God because He knows what’s going on in the inside.

These verses tell us that God is all-loving. He not only knows about our grief, but He does something about it. He heals our broken hearts and He bandages our wounds. Why does He do that? Because He loves us!

These verses tell us that God is all-powerful. We're going to ask the question: "How can God help me in my situation?" Here's what we know: He is the same God who created the universe, and the same God who put the stars in the heavens, and gave each of those stars its name; therefore, He is the God who can heal our broken hearts. He can bandage our wounds. He promises to give you a new heart and a fresh start.

If you are struggling in your marriage right now, God offers you hope that you can turn your marriage around from stress to satisfaction.

If you are a child of divorce, know that your parents' divorce was not your fault. And you are not destined to repeat their failures.

If you have already been through a failed marriage, God wants to heal your broken heart and provide brand new hope for your future.

if you lean on God, if you trust in God, and if you give your life to God, He promises that He will help you. He will get you through those tough times, and bring you through to the other side, to something that is more wonderful than you have ever imagined.

One final note: You will never experience the best part of a marriage, the most intimate relationship that you could have with your spouse, if you are unwilling to work through the tough times in your marriage. If you give up, if you hit the eject button, if you use an escape clause when the going gets tough in your marriage, you will never experience the best part of the marriage, the part that God has planned for you.

That's the tragedy of divorce. Divorcees give up before they get to the best place in their marriage. God has an exciting and wonderful plan for your life. He does. And it's a plan of glorious hope and amazing promise. His plans aren't to hurt you. His plans aren't for you to live in fear, or regret, or hurt, or shame.

"For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord. "Plans to prosper you, not to harm you. Plans to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

It's time to pray...