



Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

Marriage is hard. Not just hard; practically impossible. The apostle Paul says one mark of a Spirit-filled life is “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). He then elaborates (in verses 22-33) on what this means for marriage:

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

By this definition, no one has a truly good marriage. As Jesus said, “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). Since the Fall, the woman’s desire has been contrary to her husband, rather than submitting to him, and the man’s has been to dominate his wife, rather than lovingly and sacrificially leading her (Genesis 3:16).

And yet, there is hope. As Christians, we have a perfect bridegroom – Jesus. He is truly good at both loving, sacrificial leadership (Ephesians 5:25-27) and respectful submission (Philippians 2:3-11). He is the model for both husbands and wives (see also 1 Peter 2:21-3:7).

No, we’re not good. But we already have One who has been the perfect spouse we fail to be. And the amazing thing is that for our sake, He took our imperfect record and gave us His perfect record (2 Corinthians 5:21).

It is in this hope that we approach marriage. Marriage is not primarily about the fulfillment of our desires, about being the perfect spouse, or about finding that perfect soul mate. No, it’s much deeper than that. It’s about imaging Jesus to each other. Shining forth, into a world in need of hope, the hope that real love is possible. Shining forth, into a world in darkness, the light of the gospel. Challenging the ugliness of sin in our world with the truth of the beauty of our Savior, who gave His life for us.

So, marriage is really about imaging to each other and to a watching world the love relationship between Christ and His church. The world wants to know if God's love is real. Our marriages must say, "Yes!" The world asks if God's truth is real. Our marriages must say, "Yes!" The world asks if there really is a love so great it would lay down its life for the one it loves. Our marriages must shout an emphatic, "Yes!"

With this as our foundation, then, what do we teach about marriage, divorce, and remarriage?

We start the same place Jesus starts, honoring the fact that God designed gender and marriage, defining it this way: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh," and declaring, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:4-6). Because of the depth – the "one flesh" nature – of the marriage union, we believe a believer and unbeliever should not marry (see also 1 Corinthians 7:39 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-15). And because it is God who joins together the spouses in the marriage union, we believe people should not tear the marriage apart. This is why marital unfaithfulness is so vile and why divorce is never the best option, but rather has only ever been a concession given due to human sin, particularly our hardness of heart (Matthew 19:8). In short, we long to follow God's design for marriage because failing to do so mars the beautiful picture of what He intended marriage to be – a glorious reflection of His incredible, self-sacrificing love.

While all of this is abundantly clear in Scripture, it is less clear whether or not some cases of divorce may be permissible, and if so, under what circumstances. Three of the passages we must wrestle with as we seek to answer this question are:

- "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." – Matthew 5:31-32
- "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." – Matthew 19:9
- But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. – 1 Corinthians 7:15

Complete agreement on the questions surrounding divorce and remarriage does not exist within historical Christianity, nor even among our own elders. Given this reality, North Platte Berean Church has established the following boundaries around these issues, which we will not exceed in our counseling, teaching, or any other area of belief and practice.

1. **Repentance and reconciliation is always the best option.** Where would we be if God sent away unfaithful people? Forever lost and without hope. No one other than God Himself is faithful. So if Jesus would have a bride, she would cost Him everything – leaving heaven to come to earth as a man – to suffer temptation, humiliation, desecration, and death.

How, then, can we claim to be His followers if there is any sin we cannot overlook or forgive, when He has forgiven us so much? (See the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21-35, which Matthew shares just prior to his account of Jesus' teaching on divorce in chapter 19.) Anyone considering divorce or remarriage should immediately contact the church for biblical counsel regarding the process of reconciliation.

2. **While divorce is never the best option, we will consider it permissible in the case of sexual immorality.** Jesus states that divorce causes adultery except in the case where sexual immorality has already done so (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9). Since adultery is a violation of the marriage vow, this could then indicate that, in the case of sexual immorality, divorce would no longer cause a violation of the marriage vow. The Greek term translated as "sexual immorality" is very broad and would include things like adultery, homosexuality*, incest, and bestiality. In such cases, the offended spouse is still encouraged to engage their spouse with the gospel and offer forgiveness and restoration (though it might be a slow process), but ultimately they may have freedom to be released from the violated marriage covenant.
3. **While divorce is never the best option, we will consider it permissible in the case of desertion by an unbelieving spouse.** The apostle Paul makes it clear that a believing spouse should not divorce their unbelieving spouse who is willing to remain married (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). But if the unbeliever deserts the marriage, the believer is free from the violated marriage covenant.
4. **While divorce is never the best option, separation may be wise.** Particularly in the case of unrepentant and continued abuse, we encourage the abused to separate immediately and inform the elders, who will engage both parties with the gospel in hopes of repentance and reconciliation. Should this process fail, the elders may deem the abuser an unbelieving spouse (see Matthew 18:15-17), which, in keeping with boundary #3 above, may allow for divorce on the basis of the desertion caused by the abuse.
5. **In any other case of marital difficulty or division, divorce should not be pursued.** While there has not been complete agreement on the two permissible grounds for divorce above (boundaries #2 and 3), the Bible's teaching regarding any other possible grounds for divorce is clear – there are none. Should a partner of NPBC pursue divorce on any non-biblical ground, the elders will engage them with the gospel and call them to repentance and reconciliation.
6. **If a divorce has been obtained on any non-biblical ground, we expect the spouses to pursue reconciliation.** If spouses have divorced without permissible grounds (see boundaries #2 and 3 above), they are to remain unmarried until they are reconciled to each other (1 Corinthians 7:11).
7. **We will consider it permissible for a divorced person to remarry if their divorce was permissible.** In the case of a permissible divorce, we consider the marriage covenant killed, allowing for remarriage. In addition, the elders may extend the freedom to remarry

to one who was divorced before conversion, due to the fact that such a person is a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

8. **If a divorce has been obtained on any non-biblical ground and the aggrieving spouse is now remarried, we will consider it permissible for the wrongly-divorced spouse to remarry.** This is due to the fact that the divorce and remarriage of the aggrieving spouse is adultery (Matthew 19:9) and that the remarriage precludes reconciliation of the earlier marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
9. **Remarriage is also permissible when a marriage has ended not through divorce but rather through the death of one's spouse.** Wedding vows typically include the phrase "until death parts us" because death breaks the marriage bond (Romans 7:2-3, 1 Corinthians 7:39), leaving the widow/widower free to remarry.
10. **In the case of a remarriage that was not permissible, we encourage repentance and remaining in the current state.** Divorce and remarriage on any grounds besides those permitted above is clearly sin. It's rebellion against God's design for marriage, and it will not ultimately lead to our good. Any subsequent marriage is unholy, tainted by sin, until that sin has been repented of and so brought under the blood of Christ. So it's essential to pursue genuine repentance and forgiveness with both the former and current spouses. However, this never means tearing apart the new marriage to pursue reconciliation of the earlier marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Instead, we encourage the spouses to remain in their current state, and we will seek to help them thrive in it.
11. **If in doubt, bring your case to the elders for biblical counsel.** God has put the elders in place to selflessly shepherd and care for the body (1 Peter 5:1-5). They are eager to support and love you, by God's grace and with His truth, through any situation, no matter how difficult or painful.

No matter how hard it may seem, God's plan of repentance and reconciliation is not meant to weigh us down but rather to lead us into the joys of how He created life to work best. Though forgiveness and reconciliation are never easy, they honestly bring about the greatest satisfaction in the end. We want to be a people who trust God wholeheartedly and pursue His ways without reservation, trusting our Heavenly Father's love and goodness, which He has proven for us time and again, especially in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Let us be willing to give up anything to love and follow the One who gave up everything to love us and bring us into relationship with Himself.

* For our position on homosexuality, see <https://npberean.org/homosexuality-faithfulness-to-god>

We are deeply indebted to the following resources for helping us clarify and document our position above:

- The Village Church's article on divorce and remarriage:
https://web.archive.org/web/20140726121156/http://www.thevillagechurch.net/mediafiles/uploaded/0/0e1135757_1340219165_0e1135757_article-divorce-and-remarriage.pdf
- Desiring God article containing Bethlehem Baptist's statement on divorce and remarriage:
<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-statement-on-divorce-remarriage-in-the-life-of-bethlehem-baptist-church>
- The Summit Church sermon on divorce and remarriage:
<https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=bd566910-7ed0-45d8-bef1-c27f99f4cf59>
- "Ask Pastor John" episode on staying in a wrongfully-entered remarriage:
<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/divorce-remarriage-and-honoring-god>
- Gospel Coalition article on how pastors should address divorce and remarriage:
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-should-pastors-address-divorce-and-remarriage>
- John Piper's position paper on divorce and remarriage:
<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper>

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