



A Quick Reference and Lesson Guide

Dealing with Divorce

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1 Scenarios and Assessment

Scenarios/Case Studies

A. Scenario #1

1. Cathryn was devastated after discovering her husband had an affair with a co-worker. To make matters worse, she was served with divorce papers. She has pleaded with him to attend marriage counseling, but he acts uninterested.

B. Scenario #2

1. Megan's husband has beaten her since the first years of their marriage. He always apologizes and claims she should forgive him as a Christian. She takes him back, but then it happens again and the cycle is repeated. "I feel biblically I should stay with him," she explains, "but I'm very scared."

C. Scenario #3

1. James and Christi fight constantly. "I know it's not good for the children," Christi says. "I think everyone would be better off if we weren't together."

Definitions and Key Thoughts

A. Facts and Statistics

1. According to the 2000 census, for some US ethnic populations, single-parent households outnumber homes with a married-couple family.
2. 8.1 percent of coupled households consist of unmarried heterosexual partners, according to *The State of Our Unions 2005*, a report issued by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. The same study said that only 63 percent of American children grow up with both biological parents—the lowest figure in the Western world.
3. The divorce rate in 2005 (per 1,000 people) was 3.6—the lowest rate since 1970, and down from 4.2 in 2000 and from 4.7 in 1990.
4. Research by The Barna Group shows that 35 percent of married people endure a divorce, and 18 percent of divorced people are divorced multiple times. Multiple divorces are extraordinarily common among born-again Christians—23 percent are divorced two or more times.
5. According to Wallerstein and Blakeslee, in their book, *The Good Marriage*, many children continue to battle with consequential unhappiness even ten to fifteen years after the divorce of their parents.
6. Although Christian churches teach against divorce, the rate of divorce among Christians is identical to the non-Christian population.

7. Today's pastors will deal with divorce and recovery much more than their predecessors.
8. Divorce is the death of not only a marriage, but the entire family. It's the death of a dream. Christians do not enter marriage expecting a divorce.

B. Biblical Reason for Divorce

1. In Matthew 19:9, Jesus said if a spouse has committed sexual activity outside the marital covenant, the other spouse is free to divorce and remarry because the marriage vow has been broken. This does not mean divorce is required where sexual sin has been committed, but it is permitted.

C. Reasons for Separation

1. Physical abuse, though not addressed biblically, may be deemed a necessary reason for separation to provide physical safety. Scripture does not command a spouse to stay in a home where he or she or the children are being physically abused. Restoration should be based on a significant change in the abuser's behavior (true repentance) that lasts for an extended period of time.
2. Mental or verbal abuse, like physical abuse, is not specifically addressed in Scripture as a biblical reason for divorce. However, severe belittling and demeaning communication can be a cause for separation. Restoration should follow the pattern established for physical abuse.
3. Addictions resulting in harmful behavior to the spouse or children can be a reason for separation. Restoration should follow the pattern established for physical abuse.
4. Neglect or abandonment, such as failing to provide proper food, clothing, shelter, or supervision of children that may result in life-threatening situations can also be a valid reason for the spouse to remove either the children or the addict from the home to provide a safer environment for the children and themselves. Restoration should again follow the pattern outlined above for physical abuse.

D. Consequences of Divorce

1. Divorce always creates new problems, even though it may seemingly solve existing problems.
2. "Children feel that their childhood has been lost forever. Divorce is a price they pay as forfeiture to their parents' failures, jeopardizing their future lives" (Dr. Judith Wallerstein).
3. The pain of divorce can devastate and follow children into their adult years influencing their personalities and life choices.

Assessment (Interview)

A. For Couples Contemplating Divorce

1. By the time most couples come for counseling with divorce as a possible option, counseling is usually one of the last options.
2. Questions to ask to determine if a referral to a professional is needed, or if police should be contacted:
 - a) Are you in any physical danger from your spouse?

- b) Describe any forms of abuse that has occurred in your home to you and/or your children.
- (1) *Forms of abuse can include verbal, physical, and/or sexual. If physical or sexual abuse has and/or is currently occurring, the first step is to remove the abused spouse and/or children to a safe place. The couple can then begin counseling.*
 - (2) *If abuse is involved, the abused individual is a victim. No behavior warrants abuse as a consequence.*
 - (3) *Answers are not “right or wrong.” This is to see the mindset of the individual/family members.*
 - (4) *For follow-up questions try to refrain from asking “why.” Instead, use “what was the reason for...” This will keep client from getting defensive.*
- c) Special Note
- (1) *If you are made aware of such abuse, you may be required to notify the authorities depending on which state you live in and the circumstances in each situation. It is always best to contact your local police station and find out what your obligations are. Once you understand what your specific responsibilities are should you be made aware of abuse, it is a good idea to let the couple know in advance.*
 - (2) *If suicidal or homicidal thoughts/intentions are mentioned, ask:*
 - (a) *Has the person tried it before?*
 - (b) *Does the person have a reason?*
 - (c) *Does the person have a plan?*
 - (d) *Does the person have the means?*

3. General Questions

- a) What has brought you both here today?
- b) What is the goal of your coming to counseling?
- c) Tell me about your marriage:
 - (1) How long have you been married?
 - (2) How did you both first meet?
 - (3) What was the attraction to each other?
 - (4) What made you decide to marry each other?
 - (5) Tell me about your children.
- d) What specific problems bring you here today?
 - (1) How have you tried to solve these problems in the past?
 - (2) Are either of you considering divorce? What are the biblical grounds?
(Use this opportunity to explore what the Bible says about divorce)
 - (3) Is there hope for reconciliation?
 - (4) Tell me about your walk with God.
 - (5) Tell me about your backgrounds (your siblings, your parents, your childhood).

(6) What role has divorce played in your background?

e) Let's explore how divorce would affect your family (especially the children).

B. For the Victim of Divorce

1. It is a positive sign when victims of divorce seek counseling because they are demonstrating acknowledgement of the need for help in spite of a diminished self-view brought on by divorce.

2. Questions to ask to determine if a referral to a professional is needed, or if police should be contacted:

a) Describe how you feel most of the day—describe your thoughts, actions, conversations, and activities (you want to rule out major depression).

b) Have you had any thoughts of hurting yourself or others? If so, do you have a plan? What would it consist of? Do you have the means to accomplish this plan? (You want to rule out the likelihood of suicide or threat of harm to others.)

c) Special Note:

If you are made aware of suicidal behavior or plans to commit suicide, you may be required to notify the authorities depending on which state you live in and the circumstances in each situation. It is always best to contact your local police station and find out what your obligations are. Once you understand what your specific responsibilities are should you be made aware of suicidal behavior or planning, it is a good idea to let the individual know in advance.

3. General Questions

a) How can I be of help to you today?

b) What is the goal of you coming to counseling?

c) Tell me about your marriage:

(1) How long were you married?

(2) How did you both first meet?

(3) What was the attraction to each other?

(4) What made you decide to marry each other?

(5) Tell me about your children.

d) What feelings changed about each other during the marriage?

e) When did the problems start?

f) How did your marriage end and what did you try to do to save it?

g) How are you and your children doing now? Any other family affected?

h) What feelings have you gone through? Be honest.

(1) Who do you have to talk to?

(2) How are you expressing strong feelings?

(3) Describe your network of support.

(4) What has been the financial impact to your life?

(5) Describe your walk with God right now.

2

Critique and Counsel

Biblical Insight

A. Scriptural View of Divorce

1. Malachi 2:16 says the “*Lord hates divorce.*” Malachi was addressing men who were unfaithful to their wives.
2. Romans 12:15 states we should “*weep with those who weep.*” For those having experienced the trauma of divorce, the church should be compassionate, grieve with them, surround them with love in order to help them overcome rejection and feel encouraged, and provide opportunities for them to serve in the church.

B. ***“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house”*** (Deuteronomy 24:1).

1. The Mosaic laws regarding divorce were given in a culture where a man could divorce his wife verbally and leave her with no property or rights. These commandments regulating divorce were meant to protect those left most helpless—the woman and her children.
2. God expects people to honor their commitments and does not give them an easy way out.

C. ***“They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so’”*** (Matthew 19:7–8).

1. God has always intended for one man and one woman to remain married for life (Genesis 2:24). Moses indeed permitted divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) but only because of the “hardness” of human hearts. Divorce is permissible under certain circumstances, but marriage vows should be taken for life.

D. Special Note

1. *Ask for feedback on what the Bible says about their situation.*

Wise Counsel

A. For Couples Contemplating Divorce

1. Explore what God’s Word has to say about divorce. Explain that God hates divorce because of the hurt it causes.
2. Make clear that the only biblical reasons for divorce are sexual sin (by one or both of the partners in violation of the marital covenant).

3. Make it clear that the Bible does not command, but rather allows for divorce in such situations described above. Forgiveness and restoration are the preferred option when true repentance and change is embraced by the partner violating the marital covenant.
 4. Empathize with the pain and hurt both spouses are going through, but explore the new problems divorce will bring: financial difficulty, custody decisions (battles), probable guilt, anger, grief, depression, and high levels of stress.
- B. For Victims of Divorce
1. Encourage the divorcees that God sees their pain and is grieved by it (Isaiah 40:27–28).
 2. Empathize with their feelings of betrayal and rejection—relate to Christ’s own betrayal and rejection.
 3. Explain the process of grief, its importance, and the time it takes. It can take two to five years and consists of five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. An individual will usually experience these stages many times in different order until healing occurs.
 4. Give hope that God can bring good out of this situation (Romans 8:28).
 5. Explain the importance of forgiveness. The divorcee must not accept the shame given to him or her because of the divorce. An individual can never truly be healed until he or she forgives himself/herself and the spouse. Otherwise, anger will turn into resentment and bitterness.
- C. Special Note
1. *Ministers are encouraged to counsel in a non-forceful way.*
 2. *The goals should be to reinforce God’s Word, promote hope, and normalize feelings yet guide towards a healthy mindset.*

3 Application and Prayer

Application

- A. For Couples Contemplating Divorce
1. Hold off on divorce (agree to attempt reconciliation first and consider the devastation that divorce can cause).
 2. Attend professional marriage counseling (it is a good idea to have several recommendations to give to the couple).
 3. Read suggested books/Attend suggested marriage retreats (have a recommended reading list and, if possible, a recommended list of marriage retreats that could be of help).

B. For Victims of Divorce

1. Attend a recovery group (have recommended locations to give the individual).
2. Attend professional counseling (it is a good idea to have several recommendations to give to the individual).
3. Make no major life decisions (including new dating relationships) during a time of emotional vulnerability (ideally for at least one year).
4. Pursue church involvement (build a healthy safe network of friends and support).

Prayer

“Lord, we know that You hate divorce. You hate what it does to people. You hate the death it causes of a marriage, a family, and a dream. And yet, it is a sad reality. We want Your will, Lord. We want what is best for all concerned. I pray today for. . . .”

4 Recommended Resources

- A. Allen, Charles L. *God's Psychiatry: Healing for the Troubled Heart and Spirit*. Revel, 1984.
- B. Carter, Les. *Grace and Divorce: God's Healing Gift to Those Whose Marriages Fall Short*. Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- C. Clinton, Tim. *Before a Bad Goodbye*. Thomas Nelson, 1999.
- D. Clinton, Tim, and Ron Hawkins. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling*. Baker Books, 2009.
- E. Hart, Archibald D. *Helping Children Survive Divorce*. Thomas Nelson, 1997.
- F. Wallerstein, Judith S., and Sandra Blakeslee. *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*. Grand Central Publishing, 1996.
- G. Whiteman, Tom. *Divorce Recovery: For Those Starting over Again*. American Association of Christian Counselors Life Enrich Video Series. See www.aacc.net for more information.

5 Taking it to the Church

God's Purpose for Marriage

By Jennifer McCurrach

Focus: *Describe the biblical foundation for marriage and how a biblical marriage is structured. Discuss the common causes for failure within marriage and how to avoid those pitfalls while strengthening your marriage.*

Lesson Text:

Genesis 2:18–24, KJV

18 And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

19 And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

20 And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

21 And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;

22 And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

23 And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

24 Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

Focus Verse:

Ephesians 5:31, KJV

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

Culture Connection: A War on Marriage

Our world is fighting a war today. This war is not over geographical territory, secular freedoms, or governmental philosophies. This war is over the fundamental structure of our life and relationships. The popular media seeks to introduce a new type of family unit as not only normal, but desirable. Popular magazines like *USA Today* run stories that insinuate marriage is obsolete. These stories are supposedly based on reliable data from reputable sources like the Pew Research Center. However, the western media is only presenting a fraction of the story.

It is true that the numbers indicate fewer people are marrying while more couples are choosing cohabitation. In fact, single parent homes and absentee parents have almost become an epidemic in America today. While the divorce rates have remained stable at around 40 percent for some time, it is still at a much higher rate than ever in our history. However, things are not as hopeless as the media would have us believe. The same research also indicates that 60 percent of Americans currently living with a significant other and not yet married do desire to get married someday. Focus on the Family reports the findings by saying that more Americans believe the sun revolves around the earth (18 percent) than say they have absolutely no desire to ever marry (13 percent). When it comes to overall attitudes about family, 76 percent of the respondents indicated their own family was “the most important element” in life, while 22 percent said it was “one of the most important elements.” Many larger churches have reported an increase in the number of unmarried couples beginning to attend church and seeking couples counseling.

So what is the obstacle to returning to a more traditional understanding of family and marriage? Perhaps it is the negative perception of marriage that we have allowed to become common in our society. For many years our cultural representation of the married state has portrayed marriage as challenging and difficult. From the earliest media representations such as radio show called "The Bickersons" to the modern media representations in television, movies, magazines, and books our society has demeaned and undermined the purpose of marriage. Even within the churches, we have sometimes become more accustomed to focusing on the problems and difficulties within marriages rather than working to support and enrich healthy relationships by focusing on the joy and strength that the married state brings. God created us to seek out companionship. Our relationship with our spouse is meant to be a direct reflection of Christ's relationship with His church.

Searching the Scriptures

Ephesians 5:22–33, KJV

22 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

24 Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.

29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church:

30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

The Bible clearly indicates that a marital relationship must be a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church.

Talking Points

God designed marriage to be an earthly witness of His relationship with His church. Man's idea of what is good (or at least acceptable) is seldom, if ever, God's idea of good and right.

Proverbs 14:12 and Proverbs 16:25

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

This verse of Scripture is actually in the Bible twice almost word for word. Perhaps this is an indication of its importance. God's plan is always the best plan.

Review some of God's examples of marriage by examining the purpose (or witness) of each relationship and what they can teach us today.

Hosea and Gomer

- * *Undeserved forgiveness*
- * *Humility within love*
- * *Addressing intimacy issues and selfishness*

David and Michal

- * *Lack of respect creating disunity*
- * *How attitude can affect emotional attachment*
- * *Addressing selfishness*

Jacob and Leah

- * *Patience as a virtue*
- * *The harm of ignoring others*

** Addressing money issues and intimacy issues*

Jacob and Rachel

** Spouse becomes more important than God (idolotry)*

** Jealousy and envy creates danger*

**Addressing selfishness*

The Song of Solomon

** The importance of physical love*

** The beauty and appropriateness of physical attraction*

** Addressing intimacy issues*

All of these couples and many others in the Bible show us that the major pitfalls of marriage are not new. Each couple teaches us to beware of letting selfishness, money issues or intimacy issues take root inside our relationship. Ultimately, when we let these things in to our relationship it leads to the devastation of divorce.

The divorce rate in the United States is the highest in the world. Current statistics show that 50percent of first marriages and 67 percent of second marriages in the UnitedStates end in divorce. This indicates that we, as a culture, do not appear to be learning from our mistakes. What actually appears to be happening is that once we learn to walk away it only becomes easier to walk away the next time things become difficult. Divorce has a tremendous impact on families, children, and society as a whole.

Divorce is associated with an increase in depression as people are faced with grief over the loss of a partner, hopes, dreams, and ideals. Increased financial difficulties are also common for both spouses following a divorce. Not only is divorce expensive, but most of the burden of raising and paying for children often fall on the women, regardless of court decisions. Men in particular experience greater emotional difficulty following a divorce as they deal with the loss of intimacy and social interaction.

Children are often affected by a change in the type of relationships they have with one or both parents following the divorce. The separation of one family and household into two (often with the subsequent introduction of step-parents and siblings) can be confusing and complicated for a child who is developing ideas around relationships and permanence.

The best course of action is to start out by making good choices with whom we build relationships. Then we should work continuously (not just when things are not going well) to create and maintain strong, healthy, and Christ-centered marriages. However, the failure of relationships has become a more prevalent part of our society and divorce will touch all of us in some way at some time. When that happens, there are other biblical principles that can help to mediate negative consequences and help to encourage learning, growth, and positive outcomes for futures relationships. There is healing and hope for the future.

Micah 7:8, KJV

Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me.