

The Mercies and Misunderstandings of Modern Divorce

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I. Introduction

- A. Overview: to best use your voice as a helper, know your context, convictions and calling.
- B. Key principle: God hates divorce, but God loves mercy. Sometimes, divorce is mercy.

II. Know your context

- A. Divorce can be a mercy to the sufferer
 - 1. Some historical constraints on divorce prolonged suffering
 - 2. Some modern changes to divorce law foster protection of victims
- B. Divorce can be a misunderstanding of marriage
 - 1. Divorce can be no-fault; Christian teaching requires establishing grounds
 - 2. Divorce can be profoundly adversarial; Christian concern requires consideration of the good of each person and the family as a whole.¹

III. Know your convictions

- A. Theological principles
 - 1. Sin creates separation, and sin destroys

Isaiah 59:2 "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."

James 1:15 "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

- 2. Repentance comes before restoration

¹ The rise of collaborative divorce is meant to mitigate the problem of adversarial divorce process. Also, c.f., Olga Khazan, "The High Cost of Divorce: Divorce Is so Expensive and Complicated that It Leaves Many Poor People Trapped in Bad Marriages." *The Atlantic*, June 23, 2021.
https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/06/why-divorce-so-expensive/619041/?utm_campaign=later-linkinbio-theatlantic&utm_content=later-19540534&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkin.bio

Amos 5:23-24 "23 Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living."

James 4:8 "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

B. Key biblical texts

1. What does God hate? (Mal 2:16)²

NASB: Mal 2:16 For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and him who covers his garment with wrong, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.

ESV: Mal 2:16 For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.

2. What is biblical divorce meant to accomplish? (Mat 19)

Calvin: "But it is asked, ought Moses to have permitted what was in itself bad and sinful? . . . he did not lay down a law about divorces, so as to give them the seal of his approbation, but as the wickedness of men could not be restrained in any other way, he applied what was the most admissible remedy, that the husband should, at least, attest the chastity of his wife. For the law was made solely for the protection of the women, that they might not suffer any disgrace after they had been unjustly rejected. Hence we infer, that it was rather a punishment inflicted on the husbands, than an indulgence or permission fitted to inflame their lust."³

Hosea 1:2 When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord."

C. Evangelical views on the grounds for divorce

1. Traditional views

a) No exceptions

² See Gordon Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Wipf and Stock, 2014).

³ John Calvin, [*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*](#) Vol 1. Christian Classics Ethereal Library (1558/1845).

b) Two exceptions⁴

2. Other views

a) Clowney and Jones: the Bible offers a paradigm for grounds⁵

“Of course, the instructions of Jesus and Paul about divorce are paradigmatic rather than exhaustive, and for that reason it is not enough for us only to take them as rules. That this is so is obvious from the relation between them: Paul takes the principles Jesus works from and applies them creatively to a situation (mixed marriage in the church) that Jesus was not addressing. Both Jesus and Paul must be seen as commanding Christians to stay married, not as providing excuses for divorce. On the other hand, the paradigmatic character of their teaching means that we should not expect every possible exception to be listed and that difficult cases should be decided on principle, rather than by seeking to stretch the vocabulary of the available texts until it fits cases that the author was not talking about. Example: is persistent physical abuse grounds for divorce? The question may not be dismissed by saying, 'that's not on the list of exceptions.' Neither (in the face of Peter's and Paul's remarks about sharing Christ's sufferings) may it simply be answered by saying 'God wants us to be happy,' though his care for the victimized and his anger at the victimizer will certainly bear on discerning what should be done. The relevant principles to ask about are 1) why Jesus and Paul indicate that marriages are to be preserved and 2) why they allow adultery and desertion by an unbeliever as grounds for divorce. A partial answer seems to be that adultery betrays the marriage covenant in such a basic way as to dissolve it. Arguably, the inveterate abuser is violating the marriage covenant in the same basic way, and a Christian woman not only should not continue as his victim but could rightly choose to divorce him.”⁶

b) Wayne Grudem: the Bible offers a third category of grounds⁷

1 Cor 7:15 “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.”

⁴ WCF 24.6 “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.”

⁵ See David C. Jones [“The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage”](#) *Covenant Seminary Review* 16 (Spring 1990), 27-8.

⁶David Clowney, “The Use of the Bible in Ethics,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, Harvie M. Conn, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 222-223.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Crossway, 2021). Also see Morgan Lee, [“Wayne Grudem Tells Us Why He Changed His Divorce Position.”](#) *Christianity Today* December 4, 2019.

3. Common questions surrounding biblical grounds and how to avoid “binding the conscience”
 - a) Does anything invalidate the grounds?
 - (1) Repentance?
 - (2) Accusations of motive
 - (a) Bitterness?
 - (b) Wanting out?
 - (c) Selfishness? Or, what about the kids?
 - b) Is divorce second-best?

IV. Know your calling

- A. Principles of calling for the counselor
 1. Never bind the conscience
 2. Use your voice and power wisely

Hayes: “Perhaps surprisingly, Paul does not call upon the community to expel or discipline persons who go against this teaching of the Lord by divorcing their partners. Presumably, they are allowed to remain in the community, with the proviso that they are not to marry again.”⁸

- B. Goals of calling for the counselor
 1. Serve the church and the person
 2. Facilitate discernment
 - a) How to help the one betrayed
 - b) How to help the one who strayed
 3. Restore
 - a) When the marriage continues
 - b) When the marriage ends

V. Conclusion

- A. Sobriety: this is consequential and complex
- B. Humility: my wisdom is imperfect
- C. Trust: God is good

⁸ Richard B. Hays, *1 Corinthians: Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 120

Other resources

Previous CCEF Seminars

- John F. Bettler, "[Restoring Relationships after Divorce](#)" (2006).
- Mike Emler, "[Too Broken to Fix?](#)" (2010).
- Julie Lowe, "[Divorce: When Families Fall Apart](#)" (2017).
- Winston Smith, "[Shame in Divorce](#)" (2012).
- Winston Smith, "[Divorce Care: Ministering to a Person Experiencing Complex Grief](#)" (2014).
- Darby Strickland, "[The Littlest Victims](#)" (2019).

Books

- *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. Wayne House (IVP Academic, 1990).
- David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (InterVarsity, 2003) and *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Eerdmans, 2002).
- Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Crossway, 2021).
- "[Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage](#)," The Presbyterian Church in America, 20th General Assembly, 1992.

Articles on the Effect of Divorce on Children

- Andrew Root, "[Why Divorce Calls Children's Existence into Question](#)," *Christianity Today*, July 20, 2012.

- Julie Hanlon Rubio, "[Three-in-One Flesh: A Christian Reappraisal of Divorce in Light of Recent Studies](#)." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23:1 (2003): 47-70.
- R. Kelly Raley and Megan M. Sweeney, "Divorce, Repartnering, and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82 (February, 2020): 81–99.