



## **World Christian Fellowship**

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# **Marriage and Divorce**

## **Divorce 04**

Marriage can be compared to a marathon race. If you don't commit yourself to running the distance, your chances of dropping out along the way increase. But if you are determined, you will find unforeseen strength to overcome every obstacle.

### **Don't rebel against God**

We have seen how much God hates divorce.

Jesus said that to divorce for unscriptural reasons and then remarry is to commit adultery. Yet many people who profess Christianity play games with God by divorcing and then cruising along as if God did not mind. They often continue to attend church and engage in "spiritual" activities or ministries, thinking everything is fine.

They look good on the outside. But read what God says about them:

**Malachi 2:13-14**, *You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.*

If you divorce for unscriptural reasons, you drive a wedge between yourself and God, for you are rebelling against him.

## **Realize that divorce has consequences**

Unscriptural divorce almost always brings painful consequences. Not only do you distance yourself from God when you divorce, you also damage your spouse, wound your children, injure other family members, hurt friends, set the stage for future pain for yourself, and bring shame upon the name of Christ.

When you do things God's way, things work out best. On the other hand, when you disobey God, problems eventually come. If you divorce for unscriptural reasons, the odds are high that you will regret it before you die. You are certain to regret it when you stand before God.

## God and divorce — Does God ever allow divorce?

Although the Bible stresses the importance and permanence of marriage, it permits divorce in two circumstances.

### 1. Divorce is allowed for sexual immorality.

Jesus said you may divorce if your spouse is sexually unfaithful. However, that Jesus did not command you to divorce. He merely said it's permissible.

**Matthew 19:9**, *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.*

Jesus said God only allowed divorce in the Old Testament because of the hardness of our hearts (Matthew 19:8).

Some people think this means Christians never should divorce since Jesus took away our hard hearts when we were born again. However, this contradicts what Jesus said in **Matthew 19:9**. He would not have given an exception unless he meant it.

However, it is usually better to rebuild a marriage than divorce. There are many marriages in which the offender asked for forgiveness, the betrayed partner forgave, and the two successfully rebuilt their relationship. The process was

painful and involved hard work, but the results were worth the effort. God was glorified, and they ended up with great marriages.

## **2. Divorce is allowed if an unbeliever leaves.**

If you are married to an unbeliever, it is God's desire for you to stay married.

**1 Corinthians 7:12-16,**

**1 Peter 3:1-6,**

However, if your unbelieving spouse leaves, you "are not bound."

## **Divorce is not permitted for "emotional desertion."**

Some say the previous verses justify divorce even if their spouse doesn't physically leave home. They state they are free to divorce if their mate has been unpleasant, financially irresponsible, sexually unavailable, or emotionally removed. How do they come to such a conclusion? By saying that their spouse "left" or "deserted" them emotionally.

Such logic twists the clear meaning of the previous passage, not to mention God's commands throughout the New Testament. Paul was writing about leaving physically. We all are married to imperfect spouses and at one time or another could justify divorce because of "emotional desertion."

## **Are there any other times God allows divorce?**

The guidelines in this online Bible study on commitment, God, and divorce cover most of the reasons people consider divorce. However, there may be times when it's hard to know what to do.

For example, if your mate is jailed for physically abusing you, this could qualify as a time when divorce is permissible since your unbelieving spouse left you.

(Never accept physical abuse as okay. Take action to protect yourself. For example, move out of the situation, call the police, get a restraining order, file for legal separation.)

If you are unsure about your circumstances, talk with a wise pastor or counsellor—someone committed to helping you discover how God's word applies in your situation, not someone whose basic philosophy is, "If you're unhappy, divorce."

## **Common unbiblical reasons for divorce**

The following are some common, unscriptural justifications people give for divorce. Feel free to substitute "he" or "she"

where appropriate. As you read, ask yourself if you ever say or think any of these things. If you do, ask God for forgiveness and strength to stop.

### **“I married the wrong person.”**

Maybe you did marry the “wrong” person. If so, you are not alone. Many of us married someone we should not have, married under poor circumstances, or married at the wrong time. But even if you sinned when you married, you can’t fix it by divorcing, for you would be sinning again.

Read the example of David and Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 11-12**). David had sexual relations with Bathsheba, arranged to have her husband killed, and then married her. This was a terrible way to start a marriage, and they suffered because of it.

Although David and Bathsheba’s marriage started in sin, God didn’t tell them to divorce. In fact, read Matthew 1:6 and you will see that their son, Solomon, was one of Joseph’s ancestors. (Joseph was the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus.) Although we suffer terribly because of our choices (Galatians 6:7-8), God can bring unforeseen blessings out of our sins.

### **“I love someone else.”**

Another reason why people ask for divorce is that, because he loved someone else. The person had been active in his church

for many years, but he planned to leave his wife and children because he thought he had fallen in love with a woman on the job.

He and his co-worker had worked together on a project for several weeks. When it was completed, he took her to a celebration party at a friend's apartment, leaving his wife at home. They drank wine and danced. As he held her in his arms, he found himself "falling in love."

Many other married men and women have told that they fell in love with someone else, someone they thought really listened and cared. You too may have met someone at work, the grocery store, or even church who seems more attentive and respectful than your spouse. The Bible gives clear instructions about how to deal with such situations:

- a) Do not think about, fantasize, or plan how to sin.

**Romans 13:14,**

Remember, Jesus said that to divorce and then marry someone else is to commit adultery.

**Mark 10:11-12,**

Resist the temptation and concentrate your thoughts on what is right and pure.

**Philippians 4:8,**

- b) Avoid tempting situations. He should have stayed home or taken his wife to the celebration party.
- c) Do not flirt, “innocently” touch others, or make comments that could be interpreted as meaning you are available.
  
- d) Be guided by the true love that comes from God, not the “love” that comes from your flesh. If you really love someone, do not do anything that might cause him or her to sin. If he really loved his co-worker, he would not have attended the party—for her sake as well as his own.
  
- e) When opportunities for sin present themselves, flee.

**Genesis 39:6-23,**  
**2 Timothy 2:22,**

Cut off the relationship. Do not lay the foundation for tragedy.

- f) Unite with (or cleave to) your spouse (Genesis 2:24) and build a good marriage.

**“I don’t love my mate” or “I’ve fallen out of love.”**

The Bible tells husbands to love their wives.

**Ephesians 5:25,**

Wives to love their husbands.

**Titus 2:4,**

Biblical love is seen primarily in choices, attitudes and actions, not in emotions. True love is based on our promises to God and to each other, not on how we feel at the moment.

Many marriages have been transformed when people discovered they could choose to love.

Study **1 Corinthians 13:4-8**, a passage that describes true love. You will see that not one verse describes love in the emotional terms you might expect.

The good news is that once you choose to practice the Bible's love principles, you also begin to experience emotional love.

**“My spouse doesn't love me.”**

It can be crushing to think you are unloved. Yet our love should not depend on being loved.

**Matthew 5:44-45**, *But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

Since Jesus said to love your enemy, you can be sure he wants you to love your husband or wife, no matter what. Think about Christ's example. He loved those who rejected him.

How can you do this?  
Only with God's help.

Sincerely ask God to help you follow the love instructions in 1 Corinthians 13 and you will see your attitude change.

God will bless your obedience to His word, and as time goes on, you will probably see your mate respond to your love.

**“I'm so unhappy. This can't be what God wants.”**

Most people divorce because they are desperately unhappy. By disobeying God's Word and taking things into their own hands, they think they will find happiness. They pay a huge price. When they disobey God, they turn away from the source of joy—Jesus Christ.

**John 15:11**, *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

If you think God doesn't want you to be miserable, you're right. However, God wants you to seek relief His way, not by sinning. The solution is to turn to the Lord and His word—to learn how to experience his joy whatever your situation.

**“We’re incompatible” or “We have grown apart.”**

You may think that you and your spouse have incompatible personalities. Or you may not share similar beliefs, values, or interests. Perhaps your sex life is unsatisfying. Whatever the frustration, the answer is to learn how to flourish in your situation while working to improve it, not run away.

My wife and I have extremely different personalities, talents, and interests. During decades of marriage, we have had to accommodate hundreds of differences, large and small.

**“I want to develop my ministry.”**

One young minister told about the ministry he had with single adults before he married. He said that after marrying, he was so distracted by problems with his wife that he didn’t have time for his ministry. He was sure God wanted him to divorce and move back into the ministry.

I hope you can see how foolish this argument was. He was telling God he planned to disobey Him so he could serve Him.

**“We were not married in God’s eyes.”**

Some rationalize divorce by claiming they are not really married, saying, “All we have is a piece of paper.” Using the

same logic, I could disavow any legal contract if I later decided God had not approved of it. My word and the authority of the law would no longer have a hold on me.

This obviously is not the way God looks at things. Look again at the example of David and Bathsheba. There is no question that their marriage was not God's perfect plan, yet God didn't have them divorce. Once you marry, you are married.

**“He's not saved” or “She's not a good Christian.”**

Even if your spouse is not a Christian—or is a lukewarm Christian—God says not to divorce. Instead, he calls on you to pray for your mate, be a great example, and win him or her to Christ through your love.

**1 Corinthians 7:12-16,**

*If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him ... How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

**1 Peter 3:1,** *Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour of their wives.*

## **“I don’t have peace.”**

Some justify divorce by saying, “I don’t have peace, and God called me to peace.” They’re right when they say God wants them to experience peace. But they are wrong when they think they can get it by disobeying God’s commands and seeking peace in their own fashion.

Imagine a harried parent telling his or her child, “I don’t feel peace, so I’m leaving you and getting some nicer children.” Or imagine someone in a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean saying, “I’m getting seasick” and jumping out of the boat. Divorcing your spouse to find peace is just as foolish—and just as serious an error in God’s eyes.

Don’t commit sin to find peace. Instead, seek God’s peace in your circumstances.

**John 16:33**, *In me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*

## **“She would be happier without me.”**

Your mate may be unhappy, but don’t use this as an excuse to divorce. You are not being noble or loving if you do. You simply

are sinning. The noblest thing you can do is obey God. Stay in your marriage and work at making it the best one possible.

**“We serve a forgiving God. He will forgive me.”**

The Bible never encourages us to sin while simultaneously claiming God’s forgiveness. You can count on his forgiveness when you genuinely confess your sin, not when you harden your heart and disobey him.

God’s word is full of warnings about professing the name of the Lord while rejecting his commands.

Read **Malachi 2:13-14**.

God says that in spite of tears, weeping and wailing, he “no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands” because of divorce.

**“We are living under grace, and we serve a God of love. Don’t be legalistic.”**

Jude forcefully refuted this when he wrote that,

**Jude 1:4,**

Paul also denounced this argument when he wrote:

**Romans 6:1-2, *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?***

When you divorce for non-scriptural reasons, you are actively rebelling against God.

**Hosea 7:13-14,**

**Hosea 8:2-3,**

**Hosea 9:4,**

**Amos 5:21,**

These are written as warnings to those who claim to seek God but choose to sin at the same time.

No one is perfect (1 John 1:8). If we couldn't ask for God's forgiveness, we would be without hope. But don't play games with the Lord by saying you love him while at the same time disobeying him.

**“Divorce is no worse than other sins.”**

This excuse goes right along with “We serve a forgiving God. He will forgive me.”

People who use this argument often have two points:

1. No sin is worse than other sins and
  2. Everybody sins from time to time,
- so what's the big deal?

If you think this way, you open the door to a world of sin, for you excuse sin so easily.

The argument that “divorce is no worse than other sins, so it’s okay to divorce,” is nonsense.

We should look for ways to please God, not excuses to disobey him.

Read God’s call to holiness in **Leviticus 11:44, Romans 12:1, Ephesians 5:4-5, and 1 Thessalonians 4:7.**

When you choose to sin, you put a distance between God and yourself. That distance grows because you have hardened your heart to his voice.

Further, in some crucial aspects, it’s not true that no sin is worse than other sins.

Read **Malachi 2:13-16** again to see the forcefulness of God’s condemnation of divorce.

Also read **1 Corinthians 6:13-20** in which Paul highlighted sexual sins because “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (**1 Corinthians 6:19**).

**“He is physically abusive.”**

There are situations in which you should take action to protect yourself. Physical abuse is one of them. A man cannot begin to understand the emotional harm, not to mention the physical

damage, which he inflicts when he abuses his wife. The same is equally true with a physically abusive woman.

It is often wise to separate when physical abuse occurs.

The purpose of separating usually should not be to lay the foundation for a divorce, but rather to

- a) prevent further violence and
- b) provide adequate time for the couple to receive biblical counselling to build a solid marriage.

Other appropriate responses to abuse include talking to your pastor, calling the police, or getting a restraining order. It is okay for a Christian to appeal to the civil authorities. In **Acts 25:11** about the time Saul claimed his rights as a Roman citizen when he was mistreated.

**“I committed a sexual sin.”**

“Since I had an affair, our marriage is over and I’m free to divorce.” That’s not what the Bible says. If you committed adultery, your spouse is free to divorce you. It doesn’t work the other way around.

**“He committed ‘mental adultery.’”**

If your spouse longingly stares, or seems to stare, at someone else, don’t say, “He looked at another woman lustfully.

According to Matthew 5:27-28, he committed adultery in his heart, so I can divorce him.”

This would be a misuse of the Scriptures. To use the same line of reasoning, I could take someone to court as a murderer for getting angry with me (Matthew 5:22 and 1 John 3:15). These passages are written to strengthen us against lust and anger, not to justify legal actions.

There are hundreds of additional “Christian” reasons for divorce.

God loves you and will help you in your situation. Learn to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). Trust him and follow his commands; he will help you through your hard times.

## **What if you have already divorced?**

If you divorced for unbiblical reasons, particularly if you were a Christian when you did so, don’t pretend that divorcing your spouse wasn’t sinful or that it somehow was okay with God.

I am concerned for Christians who divorce for unscriptural reasons and are not willing to face their sin. When we choose to sin, we harden our hearts toward God and his commandments.

Rather than genuinely confessing, we justify our actions. Some say, for example, “I know it was a sin, but it was the only thing I could do.” Or, “We live under grace, not law.” Or, “I knew it was wrong, but Jesus told me he would forgive me if I did it.”

It was not Jesus who told them it was okay to divorce. He commanded us not to divorce and added that if we divorce for unscriptural reasons and remarry, we commit adultery (Matthew 19:9).

The Bible uses stinging words to describe those who justify sin by saying “We live under grace.” Remember Jude’s words:

**Jude 1:4**, *They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*

**Don’t justify sin. God is not impressed by our excuses.**

If you divorced your spouse for unscriptural reasons and you both are Christians, you should probably pursue restoration of your marriage if neither of you has remarried. Seek counsel from a Bible-believing pastor before you make a decision.

If you were a Christian when you divorced and have married someone else, confess that you started in sin. If you truly confess, Christ will forgive you (1 John 1:9) and help you deal with the mess you created.

By truly confess,

- a) genuinely face the awfulness of the sin of divorcing and
- b) acknowledge that if you could make the decision again you would not divorce.

After confessing your sin, do not divorce your present spouse to remarry your previous mate. You cannot undo the effect of sin by sinning again.

**There is hope in the Lord, even in this ungodly situation.**

When we disobey God's word, we suffer. But when we honestly and humbly confess our sins, Christ helps us put the past behind and press on.

**Philippians 3:13-14**, *Forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

However, don't be casual about "forgetting what is behind." You have harmed others and need to do what you can to promote healing. You should consider apologizing to your ex-spouse, children, close friends, and church. When you offer an apology, don't make excuses. Respond with understanding, patience, and love if others do not forgive you.

When you genuinely confess your sins, God can build mansions out of ashes.