



The moral and Christian issues surrounding relationship breakdown

Restored Lives is designed for people of all faiths and none. We have created a video and this handout because the course is usually run by church communities and many guests are Christians who are wrestling with these issues. For many this is a vital part of the journey of recovery. The video we have created explores what the Bible says about divorce. If you prefer to read this content it is presented in written form in this handout.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW0rZWSMZHI&feature=youtu.be>

Other resources:

Mosaic Ministries

Coach, Speaker & Divorce Recovery Specialist Gen Loaker has created a series of videos on her YouTube Channel that explore Christian challenges surrounding divorce and separation

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSifvZD113FHT-FaJC835Lw>

Tim Stillwell St Dionis, Parsons Green

Part of a series about the Sermon On The Mount, Tim Stillwell preaches on Matthew 5:31-32 & Matthew 19:3-9. He explores what the bible teaches about divorce.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/adultery-tim-stilwell/id1228070474?i=1000384544935>

Pete Greig, Emmaus Road

Part of a series about the Sermon On The Mount, Pete Greig seeks to apply some of Christ's most radical teachings to the most sensitive areas of our lives. Titled "Jesus On Sex, Swearing, Adultery & Divorce".

<https://emmausrd.com/series/the-way-of-the-king/>

Kris Vallotton, Bethel Church

Can there be life after divorce? The Church has sometimes fallen into judging and marginalizing Christians who have experienced past failures in marriage. Kris Vallotton courageously shares vulnerable stories from his son's divorce and tackles passages to ask the tough questions of divorce and remarriage. This message will revolutionize the way we help restore our brothers and sisters and recommission them to live and love again.

<https://youtu.be/NjLdYVCulN0>

Richard Rohr, Catholic Franciscan Priest

This excerpt is from a podcast, Richard Rohr in conversation with Paul Swanson and Brie Stoner is a response to a listener's question on non-duality (duality is all or nothing thinking). The conversation covers many issues around relationships, separation and divorce.

<https://www.restoredlives.org/richardrohr>

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Sadly you may have experienced pain as a result of reactions encountered within the church – perhaps you’ve been misunderstood, alienated or judged in the very place you’d been hoping for acceptance, help and love – and, if that’s been your experience, we want to say how very sorry we are.

The church should be the best place to come because of its love, forgiveness, and wisdom so we are hugely sorry if you have had a bad reaction from the church. The truth is that God loves us and, in all circumstances, he wants to bring us restoration and healing and so on behalf of the church we apologise for any bad reaction.

This handout looks at what the Bible says and focuses on the key passages and comments. The subject is not straightforward, bible passages references are included in full at the end. There are also a couple of books we recommend if you want to look at this in more detail.

We have come to our own understanding on this subject after years of prayer, wrestling with the biblical texts, reading books and some very extended discussions with various theologians and we recognise and respect that others have different views. We humbly share our understanding in the hope that it will help you to discern your own.

We do not seek more division, but bring these views forward to give a foundation for you to make your own judgement, particularly as currently there is not much discussion on the issues involved.

One issue is clear - people want black and white answers as to whether the Bible says that divorce or remarriage is “allowed” but the bible is not a list of rules and regulations it’s a story of God’s love for us.

Human relationships are far too complex to make individual situations easy to compare. The bible is more like a puzzle, with thoughts and concepts throughout, all written in different contexts and with different intentions. We need to review them all. Taking one passage in isolation is sometimes dangerous and could cause a misunderstanding which does not fully articulate the Bible’s overall position.

God’s love of relationships


God finds deep joy in good relationships. In fact, God is depicted as a beautiful relationship. The Trinity is the most compelling image of this shown in the incredible unity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God is characterised and expressed by His relationship together in the Trinity and His plan for us is to replicate this good, loving relationship in our lives.

As a result, in John 13.34-35 Jesus says: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”.*



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The love reflected in the Trinity is given to us and we are then called to give it to others.

Marriage reflects this love in the most intense human way. It highlights that marriage is intended to be a beautiful representation of God's love in the world. This is God's intention for us in marriage as well as for all our relationships.

It is then obvious that God hates division, disunity and separation of people and because marriage in one of our clearest mirrors of God's love for us, he hates divorce.

God hates divorce but He also "divorces" Israel

In the Old Testament in Malachi 2:16 it states that God hates divorce and this comment is effectively reiterated by Jesus when he says:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9) This verse is used in many marriage ceremonies.

It is clear that God hates divorce however if this verse is read in isolation it could create the idea that God does not allow divorce and worse still, that He hates divorcees, neither are true.

Few Christians talk about the verse in the Old Testament where the prophet Jeremiah, inspired by the Holy Spirit, speaks of God as a divorcee himself. In Jeremiah 3 v8 it says: *"I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries"*.

In this verse God divorces Israel. It would therefore appear that He knows the pain involved in having to make the difficult decision to divorce someone even though He himself is all about love, reconciliation and unity. Jeremiah states in this situation, God says enough is enough and He not only separates himself from Israel but divorces Himself from Israel.

So how can God hate divorce but give Jeremiah the picture of Himself as a divorcee at the same time? What makes sense of these two opposites?

God hates divorce, not just because it does not reflect who He is, but also because of the pain that it causes.

So, when he says don't divorce, it is also because he wants to protect you from pain and that is why we would encourage you to do everything you can to avoid divorce, because the pain of it is so great.

Although God hates divorce, He also knows the pain involved when the marriage vows are broken and how this cannot always be ignored. The actions of Israel were to such a serious degree that they separated themselves from the marriage leaving God, as the innocent party, to decide whether to divorce.

It is then obvious that God hates division, disunity and separation of people and because marriage in one of our clearest mirrors of God's love for us, he hates divorce.

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Reasons for divorce

What Jesus says on the reasons for divorce is obviously crucial and in a similar way he says that we shouldn't divorce but then gives a reason of why we can. The bible records in Matthew 19:3–10 what Jesus says in response to a question from the Pharisees on the hot topic of the day – can you divorce for “any cause” – the question relates to a specific verse from Deuteronomy 24 which was actively used by Jews in his day.

Jesus replies on one hand “*what God has joined together, let no one separate*”, which seems to indicate a hatred of divorce and a reinforcement of Malachi 2:16, but at the same time Jesus highlights one exception to this rule - adultery.

This highlights that although it was not part of God's original purpose for marriages to be broken, they **can** be, as highlighted by Jesus' exemption.

Sometimes people focus solely on either the command not to separate or by the single exemption given by Jesus in Matthew 19 without looking elsewhere in the bible.

Importantly, within the New Testament, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, mentions another example that can end a marriage. If an unbelieving partner leaves and will not return, the believer may, with clear conscience, let him or her go. Paul would not have added a new ground for divorce unless St Paul himself thought it was consistent with the broader context of Jesus' teaching.

Furthermore, the Old Testament talks of situations, not just adultery, which could precipitate divorce. Exodus 21 refers to divorce if you were not fed, clothed or loved sexually and the author David Instone-Brewer in his book “Four Biblical Grounds for Divorce” brings this passage to life extremely well. The issues of being fed, clothed and loved sexually form the basis of the marriage vows and were listed in marriage certificates at the time. The absence of them were therefore reasons for divorce, as highlighted by Exodus 21, and these were not in dispute at Jesus' time. For Jews at the time an issue such as abuse was regarded as the most serious form of this neglect and thus seen as a reason for divorce.

Therefore, taking Jesus' words, Paul's guidance as well as the verses from the Old Testament, which Jesus respected, we know that the bible allows divorce in all these cases. As a result, we believe that where the misconduct is so great that it undermines the whole marriage relationship, then divorce is allowed.

It takes two to build and sustain a marriage and to be faithful to the marriage vows. We meet people for whom it has become unwise or impossible to stay in a marriage, sometimes for the wellbeing of their children, sometimes for their own safety or emotional health because of physical violence, severe and prolonged emotional abuse or persistent sexual unfaithfulness. For them, separation and/or divorce is a valid choice which could be seen as the “lesser of two evils”. But these are not black and white rules. We are caught in the Christian world of prayer, faith, forgiveness and hope which can change things and the real painful world of today.

Caught between hating divorce and seeing that sometimes it is the right thing to do. It is difficult to balance and is maybe a reflection of the constant balance in the Christian life of truth and grace that we walk.



Remarriage

In Jesus' day, it was generally assumed that divorced people would remarry. Hence in Matthew 5:32, Jesus says that anyone who divorces his wife *'causes her to become an adulteress'*. which would not be the case if she remained single. Women had little option in a society with no paid jobs for women or social security, financial constraints forced them to remarry or become prostitutes. Practically, all cultures in the ancient world understood that divorce carried with it the permission to remarry.

We do not believe Jesus was labelling every remarriage adulterous. He was speaking to those who used the Mosaic certificate of divorce as justification for abandoning a marriage and marrying someone else. The divorce certificate isn't a justification for a man to leave his wife and marry another woman. Without a reason to leave, doing so was wrong, and his new marriage would be no different to committing adultery.

Even if divorce ends a marriage legally and morally, this does not mean that remarriage should be taken for granted. We believe that, while the partners are free to remarry after divorce, some may choose not to. While God gives us the freedom to make a new start, it is important to take time to heal – we must learn from mistakes and rebuild carefully.

He loves us

What is God's attitude to divorcees? Well He loves them in the same way as everyone else. Can he still use you and bless you in many ways? Yes, most definitely.

Jesus was not labelling every remarriage adulterous. He was speaking to those who used the Mosaic certificate of divorce as a justification for abandoning a marriage.

The Bible speaks frequently of God's compassion and forgiveness. There are passages where Jesus speaks words of comfort and hope to people who have been hurt (and quite likely abused and discriminated against) in relationships. For example, the woman he meets at the well in John's Gospel, chapter 4, and the woman caught in the act of adultery in John, chapter 8. These stories are helpful passages for Christians recovering from divorce. The women whom Jesus meets were forgiven and released. Both were also greatly used by God and we can be too.

The story in John 8 of the woman caught in adultery highlights an interesting comparison. The religious leaders of the time are highly judgemental and seek a punishment, but Jesus, the judge of all judges, shows grace and love by giving no punishment and allowing her the freedom to move on. Jesus truly seems to live the words he uses as his manifesto from Isaiah 61 v1 "He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted".

In summary, we should do everything that we can to make our relationships and marriages work and be reflective of God's love. If they fail, God's love and grace are there for us.

God can bless you in the same way as everyone else and whatever has happened, even in the hardest of situations, shows love and grace to you.



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Appendix: Bible verses in full

(All from the NIV)

Moses divorce law

Deuteronomy 24

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Malachi 2

14 You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

15 Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring.[d] So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

16 "The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect,"[e] says the Lord Almighty.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

The Living Bible translation has these words:

16 For the Lord, the God of Israel, says he hates divorce and cruel men. Therefore, control your passions—let there be no divorcing of your wives.

Jeremiah 3

Unfaithful Israel

6 During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. 7 I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.

8 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. 9 Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. 10 In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretence," declares the Lord.

Exodus 21

v8. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself,[b] he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. 9 If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. 10 If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. 11 If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

New Testament

Matthew 5:31-32

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 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 19:3-10 (ESV):

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." 10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

1 Corinthians 7:15

But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

1 Corinthians 7

7 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." 2 But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. 3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

5 Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 I say this as a concession, not as a command. 7 I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

8 Now to the unmarried[a] and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

10 To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 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. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 17 Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.

19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. 20 Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. 24 Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. 27 Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

29 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; 30 those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; 31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— 34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

36 If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong^[b] and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. 37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.^[c]

39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. 40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Romans 7 New International Version (NIV)

7 Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? 2 For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. 3 So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

4 So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. 5 For when we were in the realm of the flesh,^[a] the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. 6 But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Appendix: additional reading

If you want to read about these things in more depth, then these are two great books to start with:

Rubel Shelly – *Divorce & Remarriage: a Redemptive Theology*.

In this book, Rubel Shelly, a scholar with extensive experience in ministry, looks at the question of divorce and remarriage. He includes many varied real life examples to review the issue.

David Instone Brewer - *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (a slightly shorter review of the issue)

David Instone Brewer - *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (a fuller, more detailed review)

A summary of his books on the Jewish background on divorce has been written entitled "Four Biblical Grounds for Divorce" by David Instone-Brewer" <http://www.instonebrewer.com/divorceremarriage/Articles/WhitefieldBriefing.htm>

Four Biblical Grounds for Divorce Before the 'Any Cause' divorce became popular, Judaism had four grounds for divorce based on the Old Testament: adultery (based on Dt.24.1) and neglect of food, clothing or love (based on Ex.21.10f). These latter three grounds were recognised by all factions within Judaism and allowed divorce by women as well as men. They were based on the Mosaic law that a slave-wife could be free of her marriage if her husband neglected her, and the rabbis assumed that if an ex-slave had these rights then so did a neglected free wife or a neglected husband.

The rabbis carefully defined how much money the man had to provide the woman for buying food and clothing, and how much work the woman had to do in producing them. The rabbis even laid down how often couples had to take part in physical acts of love which varied according to the occupation of the man – they allowed longer periods of abstinence for traders (who went on business trips) and for scholars (i.e. themselves).

In practice they divided these three grounds into two, which we might call emotional support and material support, and Paul was presumably alluding to them (and to Ex.21.10f) when he reminded the Corinthians that they owed their spouses both physical love (1Cor.7.3-5) and material support (1Cor.7.33-34). The rabbis specified different courses of action when these two types of neglect occurred, both of which led eventually to divorce if the erring partner did not change their ways. They did not specify abuse as a ground for divorce because this would be regarded as the most severe form of neglect. These grounds were listed in early Jewish marriage certificates where they formed the basis of marriage vows.