



Answers for a Changing Culture

06 When Are Divorce and Remarriage Permissible?

God designed marriage for lifelong faithfulness, but Scripture recognizes limited circumstances in which divorce and remarriage may be permissible.

EMBARK

Few issues become personal as quickly as divorce and remarriage. Some have endured painful marriages. Some have been betrayed or abandoned. Some have divorced and wonder whether it was biblical. Others have remarried and wonder how God views their present marriage.

*Our culture usually begins with “When can I leave?” Scripture begins somewhere else: **What is marriage, what does faithfulness require, and what provision has God made when sin tears a marriage apart?***

Before asking, “When is divorce permissible?” we must ask, “What does the Bible actually teach about marriage, divorce, and remarriage?”



1. Why do you think Christians often begin the divorce question by looking for exceptions?
2. What is the difference between asking, “Am I allowed to do this?” and asking, “What would faithfulness to God look like?”

EXAMINE

READ Genesis 2:18–24 and Matthew 19:3–9

3. Where does Jesus begin when the Pharisees ask whether divorce is lawful?
4. What does Genesis 2 teach us about God’s original design for marriage?
5. What does Jesus mean when He says, “**What God has joined together, let no one separate**”?
6. The Pharisees say Moses **commanded** divorce. What word does Jesus use instead in Matthew 19:8?
7. According to Jesus, why did Moses permit divorce?
8. What exception does Jesus identify in verse 9?
9. Does Jesus present sexual immorality as requiring divorce or permitting it?

READ Matthew 5:31–32

10. How had a certificate of divorce become a way of making divorce appear righteous?
11. How does Jesus connect wrongful divorce with adultery and remarriage?
12. What does this passage tell us about the difference between a **legal divorce** and a **biblically legitimate divorce**?

READ 1 Corinthians 7:10–16

13. What is Paul’s normal instruction to a married Christian?
14. If a separation occurs, what two options does Paul give in verses 10–11?
15. What should a believer do if an unbelieving spouse is willing to remain married?
16. What changes if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave?
17. What does Paul mean when he says the believer is “not bound”? How might this principle help us think about a spouse who decisively repudiates the marriage covenant?

READ Ephesians 5:25–33 and Romans 13:1–4

18. How is physical or other serious abuse contrary to God’s design for marriage?
19. Why might protecting a spouse or children require separation and involvement of civil authorities even before the question of divorce is settled?

EXPOSE

We make bad decisions about divorce and remarriage when we begin with **"How can I get out?"** instead of **"What does faithfulness require?"**

God's design is lifelong marriage

Marriage is a God-joined, one-flesh covenant intended for lifelong faithfulness. Divorce exists because sin and hardness of heart exist, not because divorce is an equally valid alternative.

The first question is not, "Do I have grounds to leave?" but, "What does covenant faithfulness require?"

What about sexual immorality?

Jesus identifies sexual immorality as legitimate grounds for divorce, but He does not command divorce. Where genuine repentance occurs, reconciliation may still be possible.

The exception is mercy for the person sinned against, not an escape hatch for someone looking for a way out.

What about abandonment?

Paul tells believers to remain with an unbelieving spouse who is willing to stay. But if the unbeliever leaves, **"let him leave"; the believer is "not bound"** (1 Cor. 7:15). A Christian cannot preserve a marriage by himself or herself when the other spouse decisively repudiates it. Abandonment may involve physical departure, but in severe cases persistent conduct may also amount to covenant abandonment.

ENGAGE

Step 1: Start with God's design.

Am I treating marriage mainly as a source of personal happiness, or as a covenant intended for lifelong faithfulness?

Step 2: Ask what Scripture actually permits.

Is there sexual immorality or genuine abandonment, **which in severe cases may include covenant-repudiating abuse**, or am I stretching an exception to justify what I already want?

Step 3: Protect the vulnerable.

Is there abuse, danger, or destructive behavior requiring separation, protection of children, church involvement, or involvement of civil authorities?

What about abuse?

Scripture does not explicitly name abuse as a separate ground for divorce alongside sexual immorality and abandonment. But that does **not** mean an abused spouse must remain in danger. Serious abuse may require immediate separation, protection of children, church intervention, and involvement of civil authorities.

In severe, persistent, and unrepentant cases, abuse may itself constitute **covenant abandonment** even when the abuser remains physically present.

Separation, divorce, and remarriage are related questions, but they are not the same question.

Safety should be established first while the church carefully evaluates the longer-term questions.

What about remarriage?

Where a marriage has been biblically dissolved, remarriage may be permissible. But permissible does not mean immediate, necessary, or wise in every case. Ask more than **"Can I?"** Ask **"Should I?"** and **"Why do I want to?"** And if your past includes an unbiblical divorce or remarriage, tell the truth and repent where necessary. You cannot undo the past by creating another broken marriage. **The gospel does not erase our history, but it changes our trajectory.**

Step 4: Pursue repentance and wise counsel.

Is genuine repentance occurring? Is reconciliation possible without ignoring sin or restoring trust prematurely? Have I invited mature believers to tell me the truth?

Step 5: Consider remarriage through three gates.

- **Word?** Does Scripture permit it?
- **Wise?** Have I allowed time for healing, maturity, and counsel?
- **Why?** Am I seeking to honor Christ, or being driven by loneliness, fear, relief, revenge, or desire?

Where do I need to repent, forgive, reconcile, remain single, or honor the marriage I am now in?

MEMORIZE

Matthew 19:6, CSB "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Remember... *God's design is lifelong covenant faithfulness. Divorce is a concession to sin, not an alternative ideal. Scripture permits divorce in limited circumstances, including sexual immorality and genuine abandonment, without requiring it. Serious abuse may constitute such abandonment and always requires appropriate protection. Seek the faithful path, not merely the permissible one.*