

“Is Not Under Bondage . . . [but] is Free”

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*“Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; **the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases**, but God has called us to peace. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, **she is free to be married to whom she wishes**, only in the Lord.” (1 Cor 7:15, 39)*

Read 1 Cor 7:10-24, 39-40

In today’s study, I wish to speak about divorce and although this is a difficult and personal subject for so many, please hear me out.

From a pastoral perspective, it is unlike a lot of other issues one faces because it is a culmination of an elongated journey. Unlike other sins, this one, the divorce process itself, is protracted over a period of months, so even though one might “get a divorce,” the divorce itself extends over a period of days, weeks, months, and years. The divorce itself is a consequence, not a cause. It is a fruit, not a root.

Divorce is one of the great tragedies within society and within the church. Neither a society nor a fellowship can long exist where the family unit and the marriage covenant are neglected and left unprotected. Both are only as strong as the individual family units that make up either structure.

Divorce is not an isolated event. It affects both parties and all within their circle of influence. It is sin and no one leaves without immediate wounds and long-term scarring.

Not only is the dissolving of every marriage covenant disheartening and devastating, but the long-term effect it has on the individuals involved is also disparaging. The greater tragedy is the role the local church has played in the wreckage visited on the divorcee.

In every listing of the works of the flesh, there is no direct statement made concerning divorce. It might be implied or alluded to in adultery and schism/division, but no listing includes the word used in the New Testament for divorce. This does not make it anything else. It is clearly a work of the flesh, but it is interesting, in light of how today’s church has made it “**the**” disqualifier of ministry, that it is not included in any listing.

We have also misread 1 Timothy 3:2, “the husband of one wife” to mean, “an Elder or Deacon can never have been divorced.” Paul’s comments to Timothy is to guard against polygamy (i.e. having multiple wives at the same time) not divorce. New Testament scholar A.T. Robertson makes this simple statement concerning the phrase “the husband of one wife,” “**One at a time, clearly.**”

Because we have misread 1 Timothy 3:2, we have made divorce something more than it is. Divorce does not exclude anyone from serving as an Elder or Deacon, no more than being a murderer (i.e. Paul) or a big-mouthed, tempestuous liar (i.e. Peter) prohibits anyone from being an Elder or Deacon. Yet this statement does not minimize the wickedness of divorce or of any sin. God hates all sin as He does divorce. If a person is divorced and it has been

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dealt with and is in the past and all other issues have been sufficiently looked at, then that person is qualified to serve as an Elder or Deacon. Yet if I as a leader divorce my wife, then I have disqualified myself from occupying that office within the fellowship. It is not, however, because of the divorce, but because the divorce is symptomatic of a plethora of problems.

Most people who have gone through the trauma of divorce do not come out of the process theologically, intellectually, volitionally, and emotionally stable. They have taken a beating and are frayed on multiple fronts. To say the least, their garment is thread-bare and tattered. To add insult to injury, the local church treats them as if they have spiritual leprosy, not knowing how to respond we think the only option is isolation and social quarantine. This is wrong on our part and demoralizing to them. What should we do?

First, we affirm the event as sinful, but in so doing we must grow past the divorce (Gn 50:20).

Second, divorce, like all failure, is never final. From the broken soil of the event is often birthed new life (Jb 1:21).

Third, God is in control . . . even of this tragedy. God did not absent Himself from their life. He has not abandoned the divorcee (Rom 8:28-32).

Fourth, God is going to show Himself mighty. His grace is going to prove sufficient. And He will do all of this in and through His people in the context of a Christ-exalting, Word-centered, Global-impacting, Grace-based fellowship (Gal 6:1).

The factors leading up to the divorce are really not the issue. The fact of the matter is it happened. I will not judge those who have faced, are facing, or will face this horrific experience. God is doing a work in the lives of His people without discrimination, favoritism, or partiality. I embrace God in the midst of the difficulty and I embrace the divorcee.

It is my desire that in hating all sin, we do not become isolated from sinners. It is my passion that in hating all sin, we do not cease supporting our brothers and sisters in Christ who are going through this dark and lonely valley. May WBC be noted as a place where grace reigns.