

When Does the Bible Allow Divorce?

Scripture's guidance for broken, hurting marriages

[Rebecca Florence Miller](#)

Your best friend, Annie, finally works up the courage to make a coffee date with you and get real. "I just can't do it anymore," she says, eyes downcast as she traces the outline of her cup. "I constantly catch him watching pornography; he puts me down all the time; he is forceful in the bedroom. A couple times lately, he really lost his temper and scared the kids badly. I don't know what to do. God wants us to honor marriage no matter what, right?" What do you say?

Another friend, Monica, calls you often with complaints about her husband. It seems he can never do anything right, and you're concerned that Monica has started to obsess about what a "man of God" your church's new, single pastor is. You suspect Monica might be getting a bit infatuated. You're concerned about her. Could she be considering divorce?

Meanwhile, a third friend, Mary Ann, is consumed with guilt about the past. After studying the Bible, she has come to the conclusion that she divorced for selfish reasons, not biblical ones. Because her ex-husband is remarried, Mary Ann can't remedy this wrong. She is having a terrible time hearing anything you tell her about God's forgiveness.

When we face challenging marital circumstances (whether they are our own or those of our loved ones), we may struggle with deep, hard questions: What are the biblical grounds for divorce? Are my marriage struggles just the product of two sinners marrying? Or are these struggles legitimate grounds for divorce? How can God's Word help me discern what is right?

Many Americans (and Christians) Are Divorcing Today

The National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University reports that out of every 1,000 married women in 2014, 17.6 experienced a divorce that year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention base their numbers off of total population rather than only married people. They found that, [in 2014](#), there were 6.9 marriages per 1,000 members of the total population, while there were 3.2 divorces or annulments per 1,000 members of the general population that same year. (It's important to note that, by and large, the number of those marrying in any given year is not the same group which is divorcing.)

But what about Christians? Are we doing any better? It depends. In [Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told](#), sociologist Bradley R.E. Wright reports findings from [The General Social Survey](#) (from 2000 to 2006): "Contrary to popular belief, Christians and members of other religions have lower divorce rates, about 42%, than do the religiously unaffiliated, about 50%." He goes on to explain that, for evangelicals, regular attendance at religious services makes a big impact on the divorce rate: "60% of the never-attendees had been divorced or were separated compared to only 38% of the weekly attendees." While regular church attendance does seem to make a difference in the health and preservation of marriage, nonetheless divorce rates are still pretty high in the church. In his book, Wright

says, “The percentage of divorced or separated Evangelicals almost doubled from the 1970s to the 2000s (25 to 46%).”

Marriage: A Lifelong Commitment

Scripture consistently communicates that marriage is a lifelong commitment. Jesus described the relationship between husband and wife this way in Matthew 19:6: “They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (NIV). [Dr. Craig Keener](#), Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, explains how crucial this understanding is, saying, “Jesus reminds us that in the beginning God joined man and woman together. ‘One flesh’ often refers to one’s relatives or kin, so the husband and wife becoming ‘one flesh’ should be a family unit no less permanent than ur families of origin should be.”

“The biblical ideal is marriage as a lifelong union between a man and a woman, both of whom are Spirit-filled disciples of Christ ([Ephesians 5:18](#)),” affirms [Dr. Andreas Köstenberger](#), Senior Research Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He emphasizes that “marriage illustrates the principle of two becoming one, [a principle] which is also present in the spiritual union between Christ and the church (head and body; [Ephesians 5:32](#)).”

[Dr. Beth Felker Jones](#), Associate Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, adds,

Marriage, created by God as a “one flesh” union, is meant to be a sign of God’s unbreakable covenant with us. This is an important symbol throughout the Scriptures: God is compared to a husband and God’s people to a wife. When, by the grace of God, we’re able to keep a marriage together, we get to be symbols—imperfect symbols, but still symbols—of God’s faithfulness to his people. Marriages are supposed to last because they are symbols of God’s lasting love for us.

Explicit Divorce Allowances

The Bible only explicitly allows divorce for two reasons. Köstenberger, who is also the President of [Biblical Foundations](#), summarizes: “Jesus proceeded to state one exception in which case divorce is permissible: sexual immorality on [the] part of one’s spouse, that is, in context, adultery ([Matthew 19:9](#)).” Köstenberger clarifies, “In such a case, however, divorce is not mandated or even encouraged—forgiveness and reconciliation should be extended and pursued if at all possible. But divorce is allowed, especially in cases where the sinning spouse persists in an adulterous relationship.”

Köstenberger goes on to note, “Paul adds a second exception, in instances where an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage. This would typically be the case when one of the two partners is converted to Christ at some point after marrying and the other person refuses to continue in the marriage” (see [1 Corinthians 7](#)).

What About Domestic Abuse?

Keener sees these explicit statements as applicable more broadly to other situations that may not be directly mentioned by Scripture. He says, “If a husband is beating his wife, that would certainly seem to be to violate the ‘one flesh’ union. If he were beating himself, we’d recommend psychiatric help; if he is beating his wife, who is supposed to be one flesh with him, he is certainly not treating her as one flesh.”

Keener goes on to add, “Now, I don’t want to let that be an excuse for people to opt out of their marriages—someone saying, she abuses me (because she doesn’t laugh at my jokes) or he abuses me (because we had an argument). Even the patriarchs in Genesis had disagreements (for example, Jacob and Rachel in [Genesis 30:1–2](#)),” Keener points out. “But there does come a point where discretion is the better part of valor. Some people are too ready to grasp for that point; others wait much longer than they should. Jesus told those persecuted for his name to flee from one city to another to escape persecution ([Matthew 10:23](#)), and sometimes the apostles did so ([Acts 14:5–6](#)). It is heartless to make someone remain in an abusive situation.”

Köstenberger is more cautious, arguing that while “the Bible displays a pervasive concern for justice and is concerned with protecting the vulnerable, it also teaches that believers can glorify God by bearing up under unjust suffering. This calls for wisdom and balance: Certainly we should do everything we can to protect victims of abuse while at the same time respecting the marriage bond and not dissolving it lightly.”

Jones, who is the author of [Faithful: A Theology of Sex](#), brings a broad conceptual view to biblical teachings on divorce. She says, “In [Matthew 19:9](#), Jesus forbids divorce ‘except for unchastity.’” She explains, “When a spouse breaks the marriage covenant through sexual sin—*porneia*—there are biblical grounds for divorce. Divorce is not, of course, required in such cases, but it is permissible. I see this as a way that Jesus protects us in a world torn apart by sin. Because we are precious to God, we are not required to stay in a marriage when we have been betrayed through *porneia*.”

It is worth mentioning that many Bible interpreters see *porneia* here as referring *only* to sexual sin against one’s spouse, but Jones believes it can be understood more generally: “If we put *porneia* into the larger biblical context, we see that it is any violation of God’s intentions for lasting, faithful ‘one flesh’ union. *Porneia* certainly includes adultery, because adultery violates the one flesh union. But *porneia* can also include violence or abuse against one’s spouse because to abuse one’s spouse is also to violate that one flesh union.” Jones emphasizes, “If committing violence against the one who is supposed to be ‘one flesh’ with you isn’t a violation of God’s intentions for marriage as a faithful, one flesh union, I don’t know what is.”

Chronic “Hardness of Heart”

Christian counselor and author of [The Emotionally Destructive Marriage](#), [Leslie Vernick](#) believes there is a strong biblical warrant for allowing people to experience consequences for their sin (see [1 Corinthians 5:9–12](#); [James 5:19–20](#); [Galatians 6:7](#)). While she affirms the sanctity of marriage, Vernick explains her view that safety may be more important to God than absolute loyalty to one’s spouse under all circumstances (see [1 Samuel 18–31](#); [Matthew 2:13–15](#); [Luke 14:5](#)). Vernick believes that “chronic hardness of heart” is grounds for divorce when there is “a

serious sin issue, a serious breach of the marital bond, a serious trust breakdown . . . and there is no repentance or willingness to look at that and how that's affected the marital bond and the bond of trust." While some biblical interpreters may not agree with her conclusions, Vernick draws upon Moses' allowance for divorce cited by Jesus in [Matthew 19:8](#) to support this viewpoint.

In her work with women who are experiencing such situations, Vernick first counsels a wake-up call conversation with their husbands, followed by separation if the husband fails to turn from his sin. A [separation](#) of this sort, undertaken with the support of wise counsel, clarifies the destructive consequences of sinful habits and could have the potential to lead to eventual healing and restoration.

Vernick emphasizes that there is a difference between a difficult or disappointing marriage and a destructive marriage. She points out that we must not seek divorce simply because we are not getting everything we want out of our marriages: "We have such high expectations—no one can live up to that. When you're disappointed in your spouse because they're not as romantic or ambitious or as spiritual or as handy or whatever it is that you wanted out of that marriage, and you're disappointed and you see somebody else who's got those qualities, you begin to become contemptuous or critical or disappointed . . . instead of being grateful and appreciative of what you do have." Vernick believes a disappointing or difficult marriage is not grounds for divorce but rather is grounds for faithfulness.

What About a Past Divorce?

If you are reading this article and you've been divorced, you may be wrestling with your own questions or feelings of guilt—particularly if you've concluded that your divorce was not biblically grounded. It is easy to become weighed down by the shame of past mistakes. Sometimes there are abiding consequences in relationships with others, but before God, "If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" ([1 John 1:9](#)).

"Repentance usually doesn't mean we get to do things over again; often it is too late to get a second chance with the same person, especially if one party has remarried," Keener observes. "But it does mean that we make restitution as best as possible, confessing and doing whatever is possible to make things right with the people involved, including spouse, children, or anyone else affected by it."

Vernick says, "Really messing up badly and understanding grace is the most beautiful thing that can happen." She adds that we can show God our gratitude for his grace by learning from our mistakes. As we experience God's grace for our failures or sins, it transforms us into more gracious people who readily extend God's mercy and compassion to others.

Navigating the Tension

Within the church we see various responses to tough marital struggles. Some may counsel for divorce too hastily, advising couples to forgo the difficult peaks and valleys that are part of any

marriage and, in essence, ignoring the high value the Bible places on the marriage commitment. Meanwhile others may respond with legalism, pressuring fellow Christians to stay in marriages that are clearly destructive and unsafe.

There are no cookie-cutter answers to some of these difficult questions. The tension remains: Marriage is a lifelong commitment that is only broken for the most severe reasons. When a Christian is wrestling with a marriage that may be irreparable, sometimes the best we can do is seek God's guidance in Scripture, talk with trusted friends who know the situation well, and pray together for the Spirit's guidance.

Let's strive to be a Christian community that treats marriage with respect and honors it as a lifelong commitment, but let's also reach out to protect the vulnerable and mistreated. Only as we stay engaged with the whole Word of God can we navigate this tension.

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Wrestling with Divorce?

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