

Introduction: It has been estimated that 40-50% of first time marriages end in divorce. The percentage for second marriages is even higher. Within churches, among Christians, the percentage is lower, but still significantly high enough for us to all be touched by the difficult after-shocks of a failed marriage.

Churches respond in a variety of ways to divorce. Some are compassionate and forgiving, while others are judgmental and indifferent to the individuals involved. Some churches continue to punish divorced people by denying membership or opportunities to serve.

In the earthly ministry of Jesus He forgave and restored a lot of people that the religious culture had rejected and shunned. He healed a demoniac that had been rejected and punished severely. Jesus forgave a paralytic with the implication that some sin was responsible for his condition. He forgave and gave a fresh start to a woman caught in the act of adultery, whom the Pharisees wanted to stone, saying, "let who among you who has no sin cast the first stone." We are to emulate the heart and actions of Jesus.

1 Timothy 1:14-16 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. ¹⁶However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

Jesus made it clear that divorce was not part of God's plan. His plan was and is that a man and woman be joined together as a partnership so close that it is like being one person. The Christian marriage is a covenant that was sealed before God and others, and celebrated by physical union.

Divorce represents a failure in marriage by one or both spouses. Why do marriages fail? There are many reasons. What are reasons you have heard that people get divorced?

But the scripture gives us a clue. Jesus said that God permitted Moses to grant divorces because of the hardness of heart.

We need reminding that we are not to reject or punish people for failure in anything. We instead are to forgive as Christ forgives and seek to help those who have failed to be restored.

Some say that divorce is harder than the loss of a spouse due to death. That is debatable, but the reason is that in divorce the former spouse is never completely gone. It is difficult to totally cut off contact, especially where there are children, whether young or even adults. There are constant reminders.

1. Divorce is intensely difficult.

a. Legally: Two attorneys usually involved.

- Legal language is harsh.
- Attorneys may create more contentiousness.
- Attorneys usually are not into congenial mediation.
- Legal process is often long and grueling, especially where custody issues are involved.

b. Expensive.

c. Emotional.

d. Involves intense hurt, anger, and grief.

e. Has collateral damage.

2. Divorce is awkward.

- Family, friends, and church folk do not know how to respond, so they too often become either polarized or aloof.
- Shared friendships become awkward.
- Church attendance can be awkward.
- A relative may say, "I told you so", or "I told you that marrying that person would bring a lot of trouble."

3. Divorce involves emotional pain.

- Hurt feelings may turn into anger.
- There are feelings of rejection by the person who did not want the divorce.
- More rejection feelings follow when friends and others become aloof. Rejection feelings bring on sadness and depression.
- Guilt feelings over the failure of the marriage may be overwhelming. Condemnation may be felt because of awareness that God hates divorce. There is an awareness that people wonder what went wrong, and were "you" at fault. There is the issue of believing that marriage was going to be for a lifetime.

When church folk seem to reject there is a feeling that God has rejected them too.

- Loss of self-esteem and identity is painful. If the spouse was unfaithful the feelings of rejection, loss of self-esteem, hurt, and anger are doubly intense.
- Every time a job application, tax return, or other documents with a question of marital status is a painful reminder.

Many people describe divorce as an open wound that never heals.

4. Divorce with children is complicated.

Visitation and custody issues have to be worked out, as well as child support.

- The spouse with primary custody may not be allowed to move very far away with the children.
- Differences about education and religious training for the children may be problematic.
- Remarriage with children may present complications even with adult children.
- Children may blame the parent for the divorce and act out in anger or rebellion. Trying to respond adequately is difficult and painful.
- Trying to cope with one's own grief while supporting the children through their grief can be overwhelming.

5. Stages in the divorcing process. These are more or less predictable emotional stages.

A. Stage one: Resistance.

- Initial reaction is to resist the divorce and the difficult emotions that go with it. Some people deny that it is happening and others resist with extreme anger or guilt. Refusing to get counseling may be a form of denial.
- Denial: It is normal in that it is an avoidance of pain. There is a point where divorcing people may try to pretend the problems are not so bad. When the divorcing spouse announces that the marriage is over for them, the other may react with disbelief, "You can't really mean that". Even after the divorce one spouse may still believe that they will get back together. It may be expressed by hiding painful feelings from others, preferring to remain emotionally numb. (Problem: When people continue to deny their feelings they postpone working through them in a healthy way.) There may be an initial feeling of relief and the painful feelings come later.

- Anger and guilt: Anger and guilt feelings may consume the person so much that they are obsessed and may ignore the needs of the children. During this time is when it may be like a war going on, exchanging hurtful words. Angry actions may occur that hurt more people than just the spouse. The spouse, usually the one not wanting the divorce, may feel so guilty that he or she gives in too much at their long-term expense. They may express anger toward themselves and even contemplate suicide.
- Bargaining: May make a last try to salvage the relationship with all kinds of promises to change certain behaviors. There may be a renewed attempt to seek counseling. Unfortunately it may be too little too late.

B. Stage Two: Grief. Going through the grief journey is necessary to wholeness.

- There are many similar grief characteristics as when a person is grieving a loss through death of a loved one.
- When a death occurs though there is usually an outpouring of support. Not so with divorce. Most people are left to deal with grief of divorce on their own.
- Friends and relatives may tell the person they are better off and good riddance. "Get on with your life. You deserve better than that."
- Not grieving well may result in residual anger, impulsive behavior such as rushing into a new relationship, or physical health problems, as well as extended depression.
- During this stage it is necessary to "take life apart and put it back together again". Some of the old parts are now obsolete or no longer work anymore. Anger, guilt, and regret need to turn into hope for a fresh start with new dreams and adjustments made in attitudes and reckoning/correction to contributions made to the failure of the marriage.
- Repentance and forgiveness are part of the grief process. Repentance provides a healthy type of grieving that hopefully embraces God's grace.

C. Recovery:

- Feelings are no longer as intense.
- Thinking more about the future than about the past.
- Emergence of new energy.
- Rebuilding of self-confidence.
- Have more patience to deal with the continuing complications of the divorce.

6. Children and divorce:

- Children experience many of the same feelings as the parents, but have fewer resources. Only 10% of children believe they have someone to talk to about the divorce.
- Parents are in such crisis they do not realize how needy the children are.
- For children the great initial loss is a sense of security, and of having a safe and healthy family life.
- There are many changes to the rituals of family life.
- Children are not deaf and blind. They know something is terribly wrong and may have significant fears about what will happen with the family and to them.
- Typically there is a custodial parent and a visiting parent. The child's contact with the absentee parent may be relegated to short times of going places together and at some point the visits may taper off.
- There is a loss of an important role model teaching the child how to work and live out in the world.
- Often contact with the absentee parent's relatives, especially grandparents is drastically reduced.
- Children of divorce often miss out on much of their normal childhood, become overly serious, and grow up too quickly.

7. How children respond to divorce: It is similar to adults.

- Denial: Small children have trouble accepting the reality of the divorce and may not admit to anyone it has happened. Children, even through adolescence hold on to the hope that the parents will reconcile and they can be a whole family again. They may resist the parents dating or getting remarried.
- Bargaining: Children tend to evaluate things egocentrically. They may believe they are responsible for the divorce and if they improve their behavior it might fix the parents' relationship. They may make bargains with God to get parents back together.
- Children get angry too. But they may express it indirectly. They may express it through physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches. They may express it by getting into quarrels with their siblings or getting into trouble at school.
- Depression: They may cry a lot. They may regress developmentally. They may have trouble concentrating at school. They may sleep or eat too much. They

may do self-destructive things, and even consider suicide. If parents are aware of self-destructive behavior they should get the child into counseling immediately. The behavior is a sign of feelings that need to be expressed in a safe environment. Adolescents with unresolved feelings may become sexually active or experiment with drugs or alcohol.

- Acceptance and recovery: The hope is that children will recover and discover new coping skills to deal with the stress of life and loss.

8. Ministry to those experiencing divorce.

a. Divorce ministry is similar to grief ministry. People of divorce need others who can be trusted to be faithful to them. They have experienced too much rejection already.

b. Avoid actions and words that would stir up feelings of being judged. They are already feeling the weight of guilt for a failed marriage.

c. It is best not to express criticism of the spouse. The responsibility is to care for the wounded person, not to help them beat up the ex-spouse.

d. Encourage expression of feelings. Exercise the characteristics of the art of listening. Ask about specific feelings that may be hidden in their anger, such as unexpressed hurt and fears.

e. Encourage reflection on what was good about the marriage and what was difficult. "When did you first realize things were not going well in your marriage?" This will help them to grieve. Always speak with gentleness and sensitivity. Do not press them beyond where they are comfortable.

f. Explore incongruities: They may say they are just glad it is over. But their body language tells you something different.

g. Gently respond to denial like when they speak of a big turn around, by asking when they think that will happen and if there are signs of that happening.

h. Explore with them about concerns for their children and extended family members.

i. Be a safe listener: Confidentiality. Be trustworthy. Be accepting.

j. Offer to pray and announce a blessing to them.

Discussion and questions: