

A Divorce Never Has to Happen by Chris Garner

The fact that divorce is rampant in today's society is no longer news. We have heard the statistics that fifty percent of marriages will end in divorce and that divorce is as prevalent within the Christian community as it is in the secular world. Researchers may argue about the numbers, but whatever the divorce rate may be, it is too high. Divorce destroys families and affects children throughout their lives and it does not have to be so prevalent, especially in the Body of Christ.

Often, Christians today look to Matthew, Chapter 19 as they seek justification for leaving their spouse. Many are quick to point to the "out clause" when Jesus says that, "anyone who divorces his wife, *except for marital unfaithfulness*, and marries another woman commits adultery." We hear pastors, counselors, and teachers say that it is "all right" to divorce a spouse when there has been infidelity. The problem is that the focus of the passage is about the hardness of the Pharisees hearts and the fact that they were divorcing for "any and every reason." It sounds like society today; looking for the out, rather than seeking to do what is right.

Biblically, marriage is a covenant relationship, a relationship that is not to be broken. Marriage is also representative of God's relationship with His people. It's a good thing that God does not divorce His people at the first sign of their unfaithfulness; we all would be in trouble! Rather, He says that He will never leave nor forsake us, even when we sin and do not measure up to His standards. The marriage relationship should have this kind of faithfulness - the idea that a husband or wife will never leave or forsake the other, no matter what happens. I am not saying that anyone must put up with the continual sin of his or her spouse, and certainly, no one should have to submit to abuse. The problem is that divorce has become too ready an answer to problems in the relationship. A husband or wife can remain committed to the marriage while demanding that his or her spouse do something about sin. This *is* living out the Biblical covenant marriage.

I am not speaking from a naïve viewpoint with no experience. I experienced divorce in my life and have seen the cost and the pain caused by divorce. In ministry, I have also heard the pain and anguish of a husband attempting to work through the infidelity of his wife. I have seen the despair of a wife who has lost everything because of her husband's sin. I have watched a wife shrug her shoulders with every argument against her decision to divorce her husband and remain dedicated to completing the divorce she had initiated. I have witnessed fear as a wife prepared to confront her husband's sin and the uncertainty of where her life would go. And I, myself, have been on my knees before my wife begging for forgiveness for my own sin. Yet, I can tell you that in every one of these instances, I have seen God do a mighty work restoring lives and marriages. No marriage is beyond restoration, if a couple will submit their lives to the Lord.

Marriage takes Work

Marriages cannot survive without work and must be *fortified* to withstand the assaults that will come against them. The American Heritage Dictionary defines fortify as a means to: *strengthen and secure; reinforce; invigorate; give emotional, moral or mental strength to; or enrich*. Husbands and wives must be pro-active to strengthen their relationships and keep them from failing like so many other marriages today. Today's culture does not care about marriage, and Satan has a great desire to see marriages fail. When a marriage fails, generations suffer. No matter how *amicable* the divorce might be – children *will* be permanently affected.

Marriage can be (and often is) the most difficult relationship a person can enter into. Couples enter this relationship without counting the cost as Jesus tells people to do in Luke, chapter 14. They enter into marriage thinking they are *in love*, only to find that, often, they really don't have any idea what *love* is or what they have gotten themselves into. Divorce is the culture's answer to fixing this "mistake." It is sad to see that many in the Church also condone divorce when life gets too hard together or if they fall *out of love*.

A successful, flourishing marriage is possible, but it takes work. A married couple must leave their parents, cleave to their spouse and strive for a growing relationship with the Lord and their spouse. Oneness and intimacy with a spouse takes time and continued effort. Couples today often are too busy and too self-absorbed to take the time to work on or invest in their marriage. One couple I know thought \$140.00 for a FamilyLife *Weekend to Remember* Conference was too expensive. The counseling and eventual divorce cost this couple much more than the conference cost; a conference that might have pointed their marriage in the right direction. The marriage relationship requires an investment of time and money to nurture and help it grow.

A marriage can be compared to a garden. To create and maintain a beautiful, growing garden, you must continue to do the work necessary to care for it. It takes the proper tools, water, fertilizer and weed killer to keep a garden in shape. The marriage relationship also requires the proper care to maintain it and keep it growing and beautiful. The Bible, books, classes, and conferences are the tools to help educate and inform. Love, nurture and acceptance are the fertilizer to keep the marriage alive. Communication is the weed killer to keep problems from taking over the relationship. Do you want a dried up, unproductive, dead marriage? Do nothing. It will die on its own without any work at all. Without nurturing, caring and effort, *any* marriage will wither and die. You may think you didn't marry the *right* person or married for the *wrong* reasons, but please understand that God is able and wants to bless you and *this* marriage. Divorce and remarriage is not the answer and will hurt rather than help your chances for building the marriage you desire. Your life and marriage can become all

that it can and should be with God's guidance and work.

The Marriage in Trouble

Marriages get into *trouble* either by neglect or the sin of one or both spouses. There may be one BIG reason or many small reasons for a troubled marriage. Very often, when a couple gets to this point, they are busy holding onto their rights, fighting for their territory, or attacking each other, rather than seeking solutions for the problems they are experiencing. They have become enemies, fighting each other over every perceived trespass and usually do not view the situation realistically. Why do people make the statement, "The relationship is over"? Because their measurement is their feelings, not God's word and they don't "feel" love any longer.

A troubled marriage is the marriage going in the wrong direction. One or both spouses may not have "feelings" of love for the other. They are locked in a perpetual battle and cannot seem to communicate without arguing. They are not working together and often participate in separate activities or "do their own thing." Couples in troubled marriages often only exist in the same house; there is little intimacy and few attempts to meet each other's needs. The troubled marriage is headed for a break up unless something is done to turn it around. One or both spouses must stop the cycle and say, "I am willing to fight for my marriage." Any marriage can be turned around, if a couple will begin fighting for the marriage instead of fighting each other.

Marriage can survive the sin of one spouse. My wife and I have experienced God's redemptive power in our own marriage and have seen it work in other marriages as well. Is there pain? Sure. Will it take a lot of work to restore the relationship? Certainly, but the restoration of a marriage is worth the pain and work it takes to put it back together. The children will grow up healthier and there will be a witness for the Lord as a couple demonstrates their trust and faith in Him. Adultery is a hard sin to get past, and while it may be *all right* to divorce your spouse, is it the *right* thing to do? Remember that *all things are possible in Christ*. A couple can work through adultery to a growing, intimate relationship. We have heard a couple speak, where the wife's adultery resulted in a child - a child that her husband adopted and raised as his own. They worked through a tremendous amount of pain and anguish and now are an incredible testimony of God's love and power.

Restoration is better than Divorce

Most divorces do not happen because of the serious sin of one spouse or the other. They happen because one or both "fell out of love" or "married the wrong person." The vast majority of divorces filed are for "irreconcilable differences" and the fact is that every couple will have *some* irreconcilable differences. The couples who choose to build strong marriages work through those differences and remain connected

to each other through the mundane issues of day to day life and through the tough problems everyone eventually faces.

There are husbands or wives married to an abusive or sexually immoral spouse. No one should have to put up with abuse or the continued infidelity of a spouse, but does that mean that a divorce *must* occur? Certainly not! The sin of a spouse may require separation or even involvement of the church or the authorities, but a husband or wife who remains faithfully committed to a spouse in sin (although they may be separated) will have more of an impact than the person who divorces his or her spouse and ends the relationship. A divorce does not have to happen, even if there are serious problems with one spouse. Restoration is always better (once a person repents and receives the help they need) than divorce.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.* Here is a command, not from Paul, but from the Lord saying, "Do not divorce." If there is a separation, a couple should not divorce and the separation should only be for a season while the couple works out their problems. Biblically, divorce does not have to happen. Couples need to invest the time it takes to strengthen their marriage and couples in a troubled marriage, have to seek the support and help needed to restore their relationship and get it on track.

Divorce will happen in this fallen, sin filled world. Men and women will selfishly pursue their own goals and desires; at times, leaving their spouse and children behind. The challenge to those who must take a stand against the sin of a spouse is to set boundaries and yet, remain committed to their spouse and be a witness of God's faithfulness and love. Perhaps a family can be saved from the permanent scars of divorce.

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