

Divorce and Domestic Abuse

Homework

Introduction

It is difficult to see the right path when your eyes are filled with tears. Kerry had been married to an abusive man for over a decade. Because of the trauma, she suffered from depression, nightmares were common, and she often experienced panic attacks. Worst of all, she constantly feared how the abuse was impacting her children. They had tried numerous marriage counselors, but nothing had worked. She had begun to think about divorcing her husband, but first she went to her pastor for advice.

Pastor Steve questioned the validity of Kerry's story. Her husband Mark was a small group leader and a Sunday school teacher. He was well liked in the church and known as a godly man. But more importantly, Pastor Steve wanted to remain faithful to Scripture. He said that the Bible only allows divorce in two circumstances: adultery and desertion. Because Mark had committed neither, Pastor Steve encouraged Kerry to stay married. He lamented that divorce had become commonplace in their culture, even among Christians. Pastor Steve told Kerry that God's desire was to save her marriage, and that Christ could restore all that was broken in her relationship. As a final word of encouragement, Pastor Steve told her that the church would do everything in its power to keep her marriage alive.

Kerry walked out of the church office, got into her car, and broke down crying. If she stayed with Mark, she knew the abuse would cause serious damage to herself and her children. Kerry wanted to obey God's Word, but she was forced to decide between obedience and her own safety. She had no idea what to do.

Like Kerry, many survivors of abuse are put in agonizing situations by well-meaning Christians who want to protect the covenant of marriage. But what if there was a different perspective? Several conservative theologians interpret the Bible's teaching on divorce differently than Pastor Steve. Their interpretation is more nuanced, and takes some time to explain, but it is certainly worthy of consideration. This lesson is not attempting to answer the question of whether or not a survivor of abuse *should* divorce her husband. That is a question that each survivor must answer for herself. Rather, this lesson is answering whether or not a survivor *can* divorce. Biblically speaking, is that an option for her?

Biblical Grounds for Divorce

As noted above, the New Testament gives two grounds for divorce. The first is sexual immorality, taught by Jesus in Matthew 19:9. The second is desertion, explained by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15. It is this second category that is applicable to abusive marriages. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15:

¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

In this passage Paul is addressing a situation in which a believer is married to an unbeliever. In vv. 12-13 Paul says that the believer should not pursue a divorce simply because he or she is married to an unbeliever. But in v. 15 Paul writes, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved.” Paul prohibits the believing spouse from initiating a divorce, but if the unbeliever wishes to leave the marriage, the believer should allow the divorce to take place.

It is important to note that the Greek word translated “separate” (*chorizo*) does *not* refer to legal separation as we think of it today. Rather, the term is a synonym for divorce.⁶ In the ancient world, the concept of legal separation did not exist. The only options were to remain married or divorce.

To properly understand 1 Cor. 7:12-16, it is important to grasp the context and flow of thought of the entire chapter. In v. 1 Paul writes, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...” Everything Paul says about marriage, divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7 is in response to specific questions asked by the Corinthians. He spends the entire chapter answering questions about marriage from different groups of people.⁷ In vv. 1-7 he addresses people who are considering a renunciation of their marriage vows, or abstaining from sexual intimacy with their spouses; in vv. 8-9 he answers a question from the unmarried and widows; and so on. The section we are studying focuses on believers who are married to unbelievers.

Understanding the context of 1 Corinthians 7 is essential when considering biblical grounds for divorce. It is common to argue that divorce is only allowed in the specific situations that the Bible mentions. This argument is motivated by a godly desire to protect the covenant of marriage, and to live in obedience to Scripture. However, it is based on a huge assumption that we are often unaware of. Such thinking assumes that Paul intended to give us an exhaustive explanation of divorce, and all of the situations in which it was allowed. But that is not the case. Paul mentions desertion by an unbeliever because that is a situation the Corinthians asked him about. Paul did not sit down to write a treatise on divorce and list all of the biblical grounds. Rather, Paul received a letter from the Corinthians asking about several situations in their church. One of those situations was an unbeliever deserting a believer, and Paul answers that the believer is allowed to divorce. So it is entirely possible that there are other situations in which divorce is permissible that the Bible does not mention.

⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003): 281.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987): 268.

This is so because of the way the Bible gives ethical teaching. The Old Testament law contains numerous case laws. A case law gives a rule that governs a specific situation. It is expected that the readers study the case law to discern a universal principle, and then apply that principle to other situations. For example, a case law in Exodus 21:33-34 describes a situation in which a man digs a pit and fails to cover it. As a result, another man's ox or donkey falls into the open pit and is injured or dies. The law stipulates that the man who failed to cover the pit must pay the owner of the ox or donkey the full market price for the animal. The universal principle behind this law is that when one person's negligence causes damage to another person's property, the negligent person needs to make full restitution. This is a principle that can be applied to countless situations that the Bible never mentions.

As a former Pharisee, Paul was steeped in the Old Testament law. When he thought of ethical issues, case law was in the front of his mind. This means that when Paul gives a command governing a specific situation, such as a Christian being deserted by an unbelieving spouse, we should try to discern the universal principle behind his command. We should be asking: why does Paul allow divorce in this situation? What principle is at work in his mind?

The principle behind 1 Corinthians 7:15 is that believers are not allowed to actively seek a divorce from their spouses, but if the actions of one spouse break the bond of marriage, the other spouse is not obligated to remain married. This is clear from the Greek grammar of the verse. In Greek v. 15 reads, "But if the unbeliever separates, be separated." Paul uses the same verb twice in a row, but the second time the verb is passive. This emphasizes that a Christian may not actively break the marriage covenant. But if the other spouse breaks it, a believer is allowed to let a divorce take place. In other words, if one spouse kills the marriage, the other spouse is allowed to declare it dead through a divorce.

Some may object that this method of applying 1 Corinthians 7:15 does not adequately protect the covenant of marriage. After all, anyone who is unhappy with their marriage could argue that their spouse has broken the marriage covenant. Wouldn't it be safer to limit the biblical grounds for divorce to the specific situations mentioned in the Bible? This objection is a noble one, because it desires the church to submit to Scripture in every aspect of life. In response I have two suggestions. First, as a potential safeguard churches may want to request that members who wish to divorce their spouses should submit their case to the elders to determine if they have biblical grounds.⁸ This places great responsibility on elders to be familiar with the biblical and theological teaching on divorce, and to exercise wisdom in each case. Of course, church elders are not infallible. Many churches are not sufficiently educated on domestic abuse, and may not respond wisely to cases of abuse in their congregations.

Second, we must learn to embrace the way Scripture gives us instruction. It would certainly be easier if the Bible were an answer book that listed every conceivable problem we would encounter in life, and gave us the solution. But that is not how God has chosen to write his Word. Instead, God calls us to something much more challenging: wisdom. He calls us to wisely apply Scripture to the complexities of human life. Wisdom gives us categories that are not as crisp and clear as an

⁸ The Westminster Confession of Faith states that the parties in a divorce should not be "left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case." *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1978 – 2005): 24.6.

answer book. It makes us uncomfortable. It requires us to think deeply. But in the midst of our thinking and our wrestling, God meets us and uses the experience to help us grow. Life is far too complex for an answer book. Only wisdom will do.

Applying 1 Corinthians 7:15 to Domestic Abuse

We now have to address the question of whether or not domestic abuse qualifies as an act that breaks the bond of marriage. The answer is yes, because it creates an oppressive environment in the home that often forces the survivor to leave for her own safety and wellbeing. We are told that God hates divorce, and so he does. But God also hates oppression (Isaiah 10:1-4; 58:6-7), and that is exactly what domestic abuse does to a woman. The following are just some of the ways that domestic abuse can impact the survivor:

- Severe anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Questioning her own sanity
- Intense nightmares
- Insomnia
- Digestion problems
- Depression
- PTSD
- Suicidal thoughts
- Physical injuries
- Life threatened (in the most severe cases).⁹

Domestic abuse imposes intolerable living conditions in the home, which often force the survivor to separate from her husband. Some may think that only physical abuse would be an adequate reason to leave, but that is not the case. Most survivors of psychological abuse experience multiple symptoms listed above (except for the last two). I have ministered to many survivors who have never been physically abused, but have experienced panic attacks, depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts, all concurrently. Psychological abuse is absolutely devastating to a survivor's health and wellbeing, and therefore it qualifies as breaking the marriage covenant. In fact, multiple women who have experienced both psychological and physical abuse have told me that psychological abuse is worse.

It is also important to consider the sexual dimension of marriage. In many cases, abuse does not stop when the couple enters the bedroom. There are many abusive men who have never hit their wives, but have sexually violated them in ways that are horrendous and inhumane. I have ministered to women who are on high alert the moment their husbands climb into bed, and suffer from intense nightmares and insomnia as a result. Yet the sexual dimension of an abusive marriage is so humiliating that many survivors will not disclose it even if they are asked. Limiting biblical grounds for divorce to physical abuse fails to account for this destructive yet secretive aspect of the marriage.

⁹ For a more complete list see Christiane Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008): 54-55.

Another factor is the impact of domestic abuse on children. Living in an abusive home scars children, even if the abuse is not perpetrated directly against them. Children who grow up in a family where dad abuses mom can experience many of the following affects:

- Failure to thrive in infants
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Insecurity
- Self-blame
- Defiance
- Poor grades
- Bed-wetting in children over 4
- Intense nightmares
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Teen pregnancy
- Cutting
- Suicidal thoughts
- Boys are more likely to become abusive
- Girls are more likely to marry abusive men.¹⁰

It is common for pastors and other Christians to pressure survivors of abuse to remain in their marriages, and one of the primary motives is the impact of divorce on children. This is a mistake. While divorce is always unfortunate, and the affect on children is undeniable, the impact of domestic abuse on children is worse than the impact of divorce.¹¹

Protecting the covenant of marriage is a biblical desire. But so is protecting a human being. The sanctity of life does not only apply to abortion; it extends beyond the womb. As human beings created in the image of God, survivors of abuse and their children have inherent value and dignity that should be protected. Christians who pressure survivors of abuse to remain in their marriages usually do not fully grasp the damage that abuse inflicts on a person. Physical damage can heal in a manner of days or weeks, but the psychological damage often takes years to overcome. *When ministering to families impacted by domestic abuse, the safety of the survivor and her children should take priority over keeping the marriage together.*

Another reality we have to grapple with is that abusers rarely change. Unless you are a survivor of domestic abuse or an expert in the field, you do not fully appreciate the level of blindness and self-deception that plagues abusive men. This makes the change process incredibly difficult. We can trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the human heart, but that should not cause us to ignore the fact that counseling programs for abusive men have low success rates.¹² Therefore,

¹⁰ For a more complete list see Lundy Bancroft, *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004): 72-74.

¹¹ Brenda Branson and Paula J. Silva, *Violence Among Us: Ministering to Families in Crisis* (Valley Forge, PA, Judson Press, 2007): 44.

¹² One specialist told me that if a violent abuser experiences no consequences for his actions, there is a 97% chance he will continue to be violent. But if a violent abuser is convicted, sent to jail, and receives extensive mandatory

asking a survivor to remain married could be tantamount to asking her to endure a lifetime of abuse. If Scripture allows survivors of abuse to divorce, as this lesson explains, then survivors should feel free to exercise that option without any pressure from their pastors or the Christian community.

When an abusive marriage is viewed in light of 1 Cor. 7:15, domestic abuse can be seen as a form of desertion, because it often separates the couple.¹³ When a survivor must leave her home to protect herself and her children, it is the perpetrator's abusive actions that have caused the separation, not the survivor's decision to leave. An abusive man has deserted his biblical role as a husband and father, and therefore he has broken the covenant of marriage. If the survivor chooses to divorce, she is not the person who is breaking the marriage covenant. Her spouse's abuse has done that, and she is merely seeking the formal recognition of a state of brokenness that already exists. A survivor's decision to divorce does not kill the marriage. Abuse kills the marriage, and divorce is merely seeking the death certificate.

What About Remarriage?

If a survivor of domestic abuse chooses to divorce her husband, is she allowed to remarry? Some think that Paul answers this question in the same chapter that he addresses desertion. He writes in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife." At first glance, this passage seems to prohibit remarriage after divorce in all circumstances.

But an important principle of biblical interpretation is that we interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. Jesus permits remarriage if the divorce was for sexual immorality (Matthew 19:9), and Deuteronomy 24:1-4 assumes that divorced people can remarry. When we interpret 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 in light of these other passages, a new reading emerges. Paul gives a general command not to divorce your spouse. If someone disobeys this command, that person is prohibited from remarriage. But if the divorce is for biblical grounds, that person is not disobeying God. Therefore, they are free to remarry.

Many Christians who disagree with remarriage view the marriage covenant as unbreakable. But that view is not taught in Scripture. Ideally, the marriage covenant should never be broken. But despite this ideal, it can be broken. Dutch theologian Geerhardus Vos illustrates:

We may have on our parlor table a beautiful and costly vase. It ought to be handled carefully. It ought not to be broken. It was not made to be smashed; it was made to exist as a thing of beauty and grace. But it is not impossible to break it. And if a member of the family breaks it through carelessness, or in a fit of temper smashes it deliberately, there is nothing to do but sweep up the broken fragments and dispose

treatment, the chance that he will continue to be violent lowers to 50%. However, *most of them will escalate psychological abuse to compensate.*

¹³ This is the view of the position paper on divorce and remarriage published by the Presbyterian Church in America. See Paul B. Fowler, et al., "Divorce and Remarriage," in *Position Papers 1973 – 1998*, PCA Digest Vol. 2, Part V, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2003): 188-189.

of them. We will not say, “This vase was not intended to be broken; therefore, it is impossible to break it; the vase is unbreakable; therefore, in spite of the fact that it lies in shattered fragments on the floor, we will not throw it away; we will keep it forever.” No one would say that about a broken vase; yet that is substantially the argument of those who say that the marriage bond is “indissoluble” and “unbreakable.”¹⁴

Conclusion

Most survivors of domestic abuse that I have ministered to are deeply committed to their marriages. In fact, many of them have courageously stayed with their spouses for years and continued exposing themselves to abuse in hopes that their marriages would be saved. They do not want to smash the beautiful and costly vase that Geerhardus Vos describes. Rather, they are sitting on the floor surrounded by shattered fragments, desperately trying to put the pieces back together, hopeless and confused as to why nothing they try seems to work. Sometimes God will perform a miracle, and bring healing and restoration to the marriage. But many times he does not, and in such cases survivors should not be forced to endure a lifetime of abuse. God loves his precious daughters too much to command them to remain in bondage and oppression. He is the God of the exodus, the God of redemption. If we want to respond to oppression the way God does, we will support survivors of domestic abuse on their difficult journey to freedom.

Group Exercise: Discussion Questions

1. What are your general thoughts on the information presented in this lesson?
2. Which parts of this lesson resonate with you the most, and why?
3. How did this lesson affect your thoughts on the future of your marriage?
4. In your own words, describe how domestic abuse breaks the covenant of marriage.
5. Did this lesson affect your view of God? If so, how?
6. How did this lesson impact the way you view Scripture?
7. Does this lesson help remove any sense of condemnation or guilt? If so, how?
8. Are you able to imagine a life free from abuse? Does that give you any hope?

¹⁴ Quoted in Loraine Boettner, *Divorce* (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1960): 13.