

# **DIVORCE AND SUBSEQUENT MARRIAGE**

**By Jimmy Swaggart**

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*"But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." (Matthew 5:32)*

*"And in the house His disciples asked Him again of the same matter. And He saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband and be married to another, she committeth adultery." (Mark 10:10-12)*

# Divorce and Subsequent Marriage

## A Thorny Question

Divorce—with or without the complication of subsequent remarriage—is a controversial subject indeed. I didn't realize just *how* controversial, until I devoted several days to teaching on this subject on the CAMPMEETING HOUR some time ago. My, how the letters rolled in. And while many of them were approving, endorsing my views, others accused me of just about everything from heresy to blasphemy.

There is not a great deal written on the question of divorce from the Christian viewpoint. Most preachers and teachers prefer to avoid the subject because they know, no matter what their views might be, that they are going to antagonize a considerable segment of their supporters when they expose those views.

Divorce is an emotional issue because each person's individual circumstances tend to color his feelings *about* divorce. The person fortunate enough to be a partner in a good marriage, coming from a loving home, often finds it hard to be sympathetic to those who become embroiled in the heartache of divorce.

On the other hand, those who have been personally involved in divorce (or who have close family or personal ties with someone who has), find the theoretical and theological questions far from clear-cut.

I know my personal life would be far more serene if I were to just avoid this subject altogether. But personal serenity and God's wishes are not always compatible. I do not feel the Lord wants his chosen vessels to insure their *personal* tranquility by ignoring subjects which can be sources of real agony to those beset by them. I will, therefore, give my opinions on this subject, and let the chips fall where they may.

## The Basis For What Follows

To begin with, I would like to state that Frances and I are happily married so my personal situation is not one to predispose me to sympathy toward the "easy" divorce philosophy which is becoming endemic to our society today. She is the only wife I have ever had, and I am the only husband *she* has ever had. We plan to remain in this condition until the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

Next, I have never performed a wedding service for anyone who has a living former spouse. There have been a number of cases where I felt the people requesting marriage services had clear-cut grounds for divorce and remarriage. But the organization to which I belong (The Assemblies of God) doesn't allow its ministers to perform wedding ceremonies for divorced persons except under exceptional circumstances. (Matthew 19:9; I Corinthians 7:15, 27, 28)

Whether or not I happen to agree with this policy in every individual case, I am bound by its constraints. And I must say, this policy *has* allowed the Assemblies of God to remain untainted by the unfortunate situations and scandals which *do* arise periodically through the question of divorce and remarriage within the church. While a dogmatic stand may produce inequities from time to time, it does also have beneficial results to balance the scales.

Finally, the statements and opinions I will express are taken from the Word of God as I see it and as the Holy Spirit quickens it to *my* heart. As with all controversial matters, I will do my best to lay aside any prejudices or preconceived ideas, and to convey the opinions I feel are given to us by God, within His written Word.

### **Why God's Position On Divorce?**

Let's agree right from the beginning on one fact, God hates divorce. No matter how sympathetic, or antagonistic, one may be toward those embroiled within the tragedy of divorce, I think we can all agree that divorce is not something "of God."

The strength of a nation is built on the foundation of the individual homes and families within that nation. Of the three divine institutions created by God (the home, the church, the state), I used to think the church was the most important. This was in my younger days when the family and the home were more or less stable and the church was the instrument for raising the aspirations of mankind *above* that of the "human" level.

Today, with the family unit besieged on every side and occupying little more than a shadow of its former stature, it has become obvious that the family and the home are of *paramount* importance if we are to hope to see our present state of "civilization" preserved. As the integrity of the family unit has deteriorated, crime, sin and perversion have escalated to exactly the same degree. I think it is obvious that the *family* is the foundation upon which the church begins to build.

Of the three institutions mentioned above, the family was the first one instituted by God. This is recorded in Genesis 2:24. God in His prescience and omniscience *knew* He couldn't begin to build His church or His state *without* the family unit to support and augment them.

God is eternally right. As we see divorce statistics soar toward the fifty percent level, we also see near-anarchy within the bounds of this (potentially) great nation. How tragic. But also, how illustrative of the foresight of God in giving the *family* preeminence, right at the very beginning.

### **How Traumatic?**

I read an article the other day which stated that divorce is the second most traumatic experience a human can suffer, the death of a loved one being first.

I suppose, in the recesses of my mind, I had known this. I never really sat down and delineated it in my mind, though. And realizing this (the *agony* engendered by the fact of divorce), one might expect that anyone threatened with divorce would go to *any* lengths to avoid it. And usually, *this is the case*.

Unfortunately though, dramatic steps taken as the gunwales slip below the surface are seldom fruitful. The unhappy fact is that a marriage without God is a vessel in jeopardy from the moment it slips away from the dock. And, in all honesty, the overwhelming percentage of marriages in this day are made without God and the last-ditch efforts to *preserve* them are made without God. It is no wonder then that such a high toll is being exacted in the marriage market.

When God made Adam and Eve, the heredity and potential for all succeeding generations lay within Adam's loins. It was God's plan at that time (and still is), that man and woman would be joined together as a family unit, and they would live out their days within this inviolable unity.

Why did God declare this should be so? Because when the sanctity of the family unit is observed and preserved, society is infinitely stronger, government is stronger, and the general moral fabric of the people is stronger. It becomes possible to carry out God's plan and His works. As you can see, as you look about at the world today, the very opposite becomes true when the family unit is weakened.

Today, divorce is pandemic. Even "Christian" marriages are failing in appalling numbers. And, with this situation increasing about us, we should

seek to determine God's laws in this regard.

What did Jesus say about it? Are there grounds for divorce with remarriage? What about "living in adultery?" Does God recognize second (or third) marriages? Is the "sin of divorce" forgivable, or will the person with a living former wife or husband, inevitably burn in hell?

### **Are There Grounds For Divorce Between Christians?**

Jesus answered this question in Mark 10:10-12. Please note that in this incident, "*...His disciples asked Him again of this matter.*" He was talking to the *disciples*. The same incident is recounted in Matthew 19:9<sup>11</sup>. Here is His answer:

Among Christians, there are *no* grounds for divorce. Christians are not to commit adultery, fornication, nor to "be as the unbelievers." Of course, the term "Christian" here implies one who is a new creature in Christ Jesus, and a true imitator of the Lord Jesus Christ in life, conduct and works.

Between a husband and wife, when *both* are Christians, no sin should occur which would be a basis for divorce. Both the husband and the wife, being children of the Most High God, should live lives of sanctity and purity; lives which are examples of righteousness.

Of course, some would say, "But Brother Swaggart, that is an *ideal* situation. Many times Christians, because of weakness or temptation, *do* fall into the sin of adultery.

What then?"

If such a situation should occur (and sad to say it has happened in the past and no doubt will happen again in the future), the offending party should beg forgiveness from spouse and God, and then ask God to strengthen him to insure that such transgression will not happen again in the future.

Can the *offended* party be called upon to forgive the guilty party? Who can resist a repentant heart? Psalms 51:16-17 says,

*"For thou (God) desirest not sacrifices; else would I give it: Thou delightest not in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."*

God, therefore, promises *He* will not withhold forgiveness from anyone exhibiting a contrite (repentant) heart. Of course, repentance is inextricably intertwined with resolution to abstain from the same practice in the future. (Sorrow can involve such surface things as regret at being caught.)

True repentance involves *resolution* to change past practices and avoid sin in the future. Given such repentance, it is not too demanding to say that the offended party should be Christlike in granting mercy and forgiveness, and restoring the offender to his former position of trust in the family unit. Jesus taught, time after time, to forgive those who trespass against us. The more we follow His teachings, the more unassailable *our* positions will be.

And, what of the offender who has been forgiven, and who then returns to his sin spots and former haunts? This is, of course, a difficult question. Every effort should be made to hold a marriage together. Some are weak and do fall, even after true repentance and a genuine dedication to reform. In such cases the injured party should try to find it in his heart to forgive, again and again.

Certainly, such a course is not easy. There are many incidental problems created by such repeated excursions into sin. But we should remember, as Christians, that we set examples to the world in *every* area. And our compassion and forgiveness are areas of extreme importance as witnesses.

Every effort should be made to help the repeated offender mend his ways and return to the good graces of his family (as well as the grace of God). If such a one is making an *honest* effort to reform his actions, and is honestly repentant after failing, the Lord will reward those who have compassion and who extend every effort to help in this person's retrieval from sin.

On the other side of the coin, of course, those who *do* keep dabbling in sin, find it easier and easier to turn their backs on the leading of God. They usually end up living a life where God is completely excluded. Satan will set a trap for those individuals and eventually destroy them. To the mate of such a one, how much better to know you *did* walk that extra mile, and offered your cloak as well as your coat. A clear conscience, after the fact, is certainly worth a measure of effort while going *through* a problem.

### **What Are Grounds For Divorce?**

The remarks quoted in the section above were directed mainly to *Christians*. When Jesus made the remarks He did in Matthew 5:32, He was speaking to the *world*. Consequently, they read somewhat differently.

In Matthew, the Master gave the grounds for divorce using the words "...*saving for the cause of fornication.*" Fornication, per se, is therefore justification for divorce.

Fornication, in its most narrow definition here, would imply adultery within a marriage where one of the parties, (or both parties), are *not* Christians. A marriage of *two* Christians should not *have* an adulterous interlude intruded into it.

### **What Exactly Is Fornication?**

The word "fornication" has several meanings as used within Scriptures. First of all it means incest or perversion, running the whole gamut of abnormal psychology through homosexuality and lesbianism. Secondly, it means *repeated* adultery. Third, it is used symbolically in a number of places to refer to idol worship, and it also means, by definition, consorting with prostitutes.

The second of the above, repeated adultery, refers to persons who are compulsive predators in regard to the opposite sex. They go from one partner to another, starting their search anew as soon as they have accomplished one conquest. They are dedicated and habitual fornicators.

To differentiate, the Bible states that David was an adulterer, but it brands Esau as a *fornicator*! There is, in truth, a considerable difference between the two.

David, more or less by chance, fell into a licentious affair with Bathsheba. It was sordid, dirty and tragic. It had long-lasting and appalling consequences. But David was *not a* fornicator.

To the Christian wife, discovery that her husband is having an adulterous affair would be demoralizing and shocking. He would be guilty of defiling his marriage and sinning against God. But his actions would *not* be grounds for divorce. Every effort would have to be made to reconcile the problem and restore the marriage, whether the offender be a Christian or not.

Some think fornication indicates relations between unmarried people while adultery involves the same between married people. This is not so. All fornicators are adulterers, but not all adulterers are fornicators.

In the event the marriage partner should fall into the tragic sin of perversion (the second main definition of fornication), the spouse would again have grounds for divorce (and remarriage). Of course, in Christlike compassion, every effort should be made to reconcile the person to God, and to his or her marriage vows. But, if they remain adamant in their choice of sex partners, the offended spouse has the right to file for divorce.

### **What About The Spiritual Grounds?**

Paul, in I Corinthians 7:1-16, speaks of the institution of marriage, particularly of cases wherein a Christian and non-Christian are unequally yoked. In verse 15 he states,

*"But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace."*

This is legal and scriptural sanction for divorce and remarriage. If the non-believer is offended by the spirituality of the believer, and chooses to terminate the association, the Christian is no longer under the restrictions of the marriage bonds, and is not responsible or culpable if he should choose to *not* remain single for the rest of his life. It is the rebellion of the non-believer which causes the rupture in the relationship, and the innocent party is exonerated in the matter.

There have been many problems where one marriage partner comes to the Lord and the other party has no desire to live for God. Often they choose to retain their former lifestyle of partying, gambling and drinking. This, of course, makes it very difficult for the new believer.

But Scripture points out very clearly that this of itself is *not* grounds for *divorce with remarriage*. (If the situation becomes intolerable, the believer certainly is not obligated to remain in an environment saturated with sin. He is not, however, free to remarry.)

But—when the non-believer becomes sufficiently disenchanted with the more Godly life of the believer, *and elects* to leave that environment, the believer is then free to divorce—and *remarry!* The difference lies in the identity of the party initiating the rupture of the home.

There are, then, only two scriptural situations in which a Christian can consider divorce with the prospect of a sinless ensuing marriage. *One is for the sin of fornication, and the other is for reason of desertion by a non-believing spouse.*

### **What About The New Christian Who Was Previously Divorced?**

This is a very common situation. Before people come to the Lord Jesus Christ their lives are often filled with sin and depravity. Among all the other unfortunate stains on their personal histories, it is not uncommon to find broken homes, ruptured families, and divorce. But what should their attitude be when they are enlightened and see the proper way?

Unfortunately, we can never go back and repair all the scars we caused in the world *before* we came to know Christ. If we were obligated to *undo* all the wrongs we authored in the unsaved state, there would be little to the

grace of God. But grace is the *unmerited* gift of God. Scripture tells us (in Hebrews 10:17 and other places) that God not only forgives sin, *He doesn't even remember it anymore*. Therefore, if God can forgive, through the Blood of Christ, such things as murder, fornication, and robbery, why should we assume He cannot forgive divorce and remarriage prior to salvation?

Unfortunately, a great number of Christians live under continuing condemnation because of the matter. They want to please God. They love Him with all their hearts. They are caught up in a situation that seems to (and usually *does*) have no solution. So their former marriages remain a stumbling block to their relationship with God.

Once again, self-condemnation over a sin prior to salvation is not *from* God nor pleasing to God. We are washed in the Blood. Our garments are white. Sins committed prior to salvation are not only forgiven, they are also forgotten. Retrieving of these sins and wallowing in their condemnation is from the enemy, not from God. Failure to accept the reality of full forgiveness is a repudiation of the power of God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

To the remarried, previously divorced, new Christian I say, "Raise your head, walk proudly in the victory of Jesus. It is unfortunate that this situation arose in your past but it is *in your unsaved past!* You are now a new creature in Christ and your past life is erased, totally and completely.

"Stop condemning yourself, *and don't allow others to inflict condemnation on you*. As a new creature in Christ, your preoccupation should be with good works, and example, and acting as a living witness for Christ. Keep your eyes on *those* things, and take them *off* your unfortunate past."

### **Should The New Christian Divorce And Reestablish The Old Marriage?**

Ludicrous and impossible as it might seem, there have been misguided preachers who have advocated such a policy in the past. They counsel new Christians to relocate old spouses and to rewoo and rewed them, no matter what the situation or the causes for divorce might have been.

Of course, most unions are impossible to reconstruct once they have been fragmented. It is the old story of trying to unscramble eggs. This, though, does not prevent misguided mentors from advocating such a course.

Scripturally, I feel they are on very shaky ground because there is no place in Scripture where such a procedure is advocated, and careful reading

of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 would lead one to believe it might even be *forbidden* by God.

### **Does God Recognize Marriages Coming After Divorce?**

There is a "teaching" which states that the *first* person married by someone is forever after recognized by God as his partner, and any subsequent marriage is *not* recognized by God. This is patently untrue.

Now please realize that I am *not* saying God condones or approves sequential marriages. In many cases He, no doubt, disapproves them where there were no grounds for divorce and remarriage. But He does recognize the marriage vows, even though they may be taken for the second or third time.

In other words, the person to whom a person is married at the present time, regardless of *previous* marriages, is considered by God to be the husband or wife. (Read Deuteronomy 24:1-2, Mark 10:1-2, and

II Samuel 13:14-16.)

In Mark 10, Jesus spoke at some length on the matter of divorce. He is outspoken in His disapproval of divorce. In verses 10-12 He states there are *no* grounds for divorce in a *Christian* marriage. But at the same time, in verse 5, He reiterates the decree brought forth through Moses. He states that, while God does not *approve* of divorce under any circumstances, He did *allow* it because of the hardness of man's heart.

In other words, there are certain things that God realizes are not beneficial to mankind. But, knowing man's determination to do certain things, He does not *forbid* these things (making them overt sin), even though He knows His plan would go forward more efficiently if they were avoided.

It is a question of legality versus spirituality. Spiritually, the world would be a better place if everyone lived *completely* within the will of God. Man, of course, refuses to do this. Therefore God, wishing to avoid some of the consequences of man's obstinacy, *permits* certain actions, while counseling *against* them.

If this weren't so, think of the number of illegitimate children branded for life with the fact of their having no *legal* parents. Think of the number of people who would be relegated to hell for smoking, instead of just harming their physical bodies. Think of the world leaders who would have to be *removed* by God the moment they take office. In other words, there are matters which God *permits*, while disapproving *of* them. Among these is

the matter of recognizing a second or third wife as a legitimate spouse, even though divorce has clouded the issue in the spiritual area.

### **What About "Living In Adultery"?**

Again we are into an area of a "teaching" where there is some disparity between the teaching and Scripture. The Bible does not use the term "living in adultery" anywhere. It says, "commit adultery." Nevertheless, the term "living in adultery" has become rather common and should be dealt with.

Those advocating this "doctrine" claim that anyone occupying the marriage bed—where one of the partners has been divorced—is living in a condition of Continuing sin. They state that sin is continually being *recommitted*, every time the partners practice marital relations. This does not stand up to scriptural scrutiny.

As far as God is concerned, such a couple is living together as husband and wife. Marriage vows have been performed and God *recognizes* them (Hebrews 13:4). Once again, realize that God probably does not approve of the circumstances leading *up* to the current situation, but He does recognize it legally. There is nothing in Scripture to imply that such a couple will be continuously recommitting the sin of adultery.

In the circumstance where there were no grounds for divorce, and such a person obtained a divorce on a whim, there was undeniably a sin committed at the time of the divorce. But the sin was a definite entity *at the time of commission*, and was completed within itself. To then harness the person with an ever-continuing *succession* of sins, dependent on the first sin, has no basis in Scripture.

### **What About Christians Who Divorce Without Grounds, And Then Remarry?**

Sadly enough, there are many cases where couples, even Christians, because of incompatibility or insurmountable differences, do divorce and remarry, without grounds. What then is *their* continuing state afterward?

Divorce is never "right." It causes untold heartache and is a sin against God and the integrity of family structure as a whole. But can these divorced people be forgiven by God and cleansed of their sin? Of course they can.

Some might ask, "If someone would precipitate such a course of events, *knowing* what he is doing and the consequences of it, surely he can never be forgiven." Well, anyone holding such a position is *making* laws, rather than reading the ones God made.

The Bible clearly states that there is only one unforgivable sin, and that is blaspheming the Holy Spirit. As sick, sordid, traumatic and troublesome as divorce is, it is *not* blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

"But wait," you say, "this opens an easy path. All anyone has to do is divorce, remarry, ask God's forgiveness, and then everything is all right. Why, he could even do this over and over again."

Yes, in all honesty he could, if he had a truly repentant heart after each occurrence. That's what God's grace and mercy are all about. But, in practice, how many people would *want* to set off on such a round of problems?

As we mentioned above, divorce is recognized as one of the most traumatic situations that can befall a person. I have never met a person who has divorced for trivial reasons. Admittedly, most divorces could (and should) be avoided with reasonable compromises on *both* sides. (Of course, that's where the rub comes in.) But the mere fact of knowing that forgiveness *is* available, would not, in my opinion, be a *precipitating* factor in many divorces.

Even with God's forgiveness, all the *other* destructive results of divorce would still remain: financial, psychological and social. Until such time as all of these factors could be removed (and they never will be), I don't think many will turn to divorce except as a (true or imagined) last resort.

And to those who would still advocate the thesis that God should not forgive divorce, I would ask them to consider this:

Of all the Christians I have ever met, I have never met a perfect one. Each and every one of us has *some* area of weakness we battle daily. Whether it be malice, envy, jealousy or temper, we find ourselves, time after time, going back to God and asking Him to *once again* forgive the same old thing. Who are we to cast the first stone at someone who happens to be involved in a sin which we have been fortunate enough to avoid?

The Bible says, "*With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.*" This means that God allows us to set the standard upon which we will be judged. If we are unduly harsh in judging others, this is the standard God can use when the time comes for *us* to go before Him asking forgiveness for some sin. Until such time as "we are without sin," it would seem that it might be unwise to step forward to cast the first stone.

I think it is wise to keep reminding ourselves of our own continuing battles against sin before we go before God and ask Him to start setting

aside certain practices which will henceforth become "unforgivable." God's grace is such a *tremendous* example of mercy, such an *essential* matter of grace, that none of us could *hope* to stand in the presence of God without it. I know, as far as I am concerned, that I am not going to ask God to withhold it from *anyone*!

### **In Summation**

Unfortunately, space limitations do not allow a truly exhaustive investigation of the ramifications of divorce within the human, social and Christian perspective. I have tried to merely outline some of the insights I have gained during the twenty-five years of my ministry.

I am well aware that some will disagree with the views I have developed, and will feel led to take me to task for these views. Many would like to see the "ground rules" on divorce made *less* harsh, while others will feel I am far too *lenient* in my opinions. Please keep in mind, though, whichever position you may take, that I have tried to frame my views within the bounds of scriptural directives.

I do not feel it is up to us to promote a "softening" of the restraints against divorce, nor do I feel it is up to us to view those *within* the situation with a harsh, judgmental attitude which promotes a feeling of continuous bondage among those who have been inflicted with its consequences. Ultimately *our* opinions don't matter anyway. One way or the other, it is God who will judge. It is God who will dispense His grace to those He considers proper recipients of it.

But let us never forget this fact. Even though we can look to our Heavenly Father for forgiveness, grace and mercy, we *never* improve our situation through sin. Even though we are *granted* forgiveness, we can never escape the consequences of past sin. Though God washes them from the Heavenly record, all too often they remain festering in our worldly hearts.

We live in a world of impetuous actions. Merchants and advertisers promote "impulse buying." Our minds are conditioned to the philosophy of "fly now, pay later." And all too often, this all-pervading philosophy intrudes into the crucial matter of searching for a mate.

I believe every person walking the earth has a perfect mate set aside for him by the Lord. I believe that when impatience and "impulse buying" rears its ugly head, and we rush impetuously into marriage, divorce becomes an almost *inevitable* consequence.

If we would truly "trust the Lord," and let Him control our lives, I think more of us would find ourselves in the God-sponsored position of marrying for life (or until the Lord returns). This is what God intends for us, and it is only when we willfully rush *ahead* of God's timetable, that we expose ourselves to the ravages of divorce.

Even in the best of marriages, with the "perfect mate," there are times of tension and pressure. There is no such thing as an idyllic relationship in perpetuity between two humans. But within the bounds of God's directions, these times of tension and pressure *can* be worked out if we previously trusted the Lord to direct our interests to the mate *He* chose for us.

Marriage can be a beautiful, blessed relationship. It can also be a hell on earth; a life term in a prison without walls. A great deal of what it *will* be, depends upon our attitudes as we enter it. Nothing on earth can run smoothly without cooperation, an element of unselfishness, and a willingness toward give-and-take. Attitude is what sets the tone for a marriage, and given an outgoing and generous attitude, marriage can be exactly the blessed relationship God intended it to be.

Marriage is a holy thing. It is a God-ordained institution. It is indispensable in a civilized world. The present attitude among some to try it, but then dissolve it if it doesn't work out, is the road to catastrophe. The fruits of this philosophy are evident all about us. Once again it demonstrates what happens, in the worldly sense, when God's directions are ignored.

Personally, I abhor divorce. I would that every couple could be as blessed as my wife and I are. I wish that divorce and broken homes could become a thing of the past with a flick of my finger. But until the Lord returns and clears up the anarchy of the world we live in, I realize that this, too, will remain with us.

My heart bleeds for those who have become prey to the ravages of divorce. They have my sympathy and I do not intend to usurp God's role and judge them. As we view the present situation of the world, I can only echo the words of John in Revelation 22:20.

*"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."*

Maranatha!