

The Myths of Divorce

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Most of us would not consider ourselves to be gullible or naïve, yet Scripture often reminds us, “Do not be deceived.” (e.g., James 1:16, Gal. 6:7). In truth, we are easily deceived. We often latch on to a piece of “worldly wisdom” that sounds good to us and justifies our actions, even if it is not at all based on the truth of God’s Word. Our very hearts fool us and hinder us from seeing situations clearly or accurately. As Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

This is especially true in troubled marriages. I have noticed over the years that Christians who are in the process of seeking a divorce often use the same set of reasons to justify their decision to leave the marriage. I have heard the same excuses so often that I have wondered whether Satan has published a little booklet on how to justify a divorce. The excuses comprise what may be called a “popular divorce mythology.”¹

While Christians disagree about what constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce, it is clear that many Christians divorce for wrong reasons. We need people around us to speak truth to us and help us see our own blind spots so that we are not fooled by worldly wisdom or by the blindness in our own hearts. Perhaps you can play that role in the life of someone considering divorce. If you want to help them, you need to be prepared to respond to these excuses.

Myth #1

When the love has gone out of a marriage, it’s better to get divorced. Although this is the world talking, Christians buy into it. The basis of marriage is not feelings of love. In God’s design, commitment is the basis of marriage, and love is the fruit. For more on God’s design for marriage, see Paul Tripp’s booklet, [Marriage: Whose Dream?](#)

Myth #2

It’s better for the children to go through a divorce than to live with parents who fight all the time. Although parents in a truly unhappy marriage may sincerely believe this, it is usually a superficial rationalization. One way to test their sincerity is to ask them to read or listen to Judith Wallerstein’s book, [The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce](#), which clearly articulates the many detrimental effects of divorce. If they still decide to go through with a divorce after reading these facts, they usually must admit that it’s not the children they are looking out for, but their own desires.

Myth #3

God led me to this divorce. I repeatedly hear people say, "I know the Bible teaches that divorce usually isn't God's will, but in this case, God has given me a real peace that this is right." This statement reveals an improper understanding of spiritual guidance, which elevates a sense of "inner peace" to such a level that it can overrule the clear teaching of Scripture itself. This view of guidance must be specifically exposed and refuted.

One way to do so is to help people see that a sense of inner peace is not a conclusive sign of God's approval. I usually ask people whether they think Jesus felt inner peace in the Garden of Gethsemane. If they try to say yes, I take them to the Gospels and help them see that in fact he was trembling with apprehension and agony. If he had walked out the other side of the garden, he might have had a great sense of *relief* at escaping from the crucifixion, but in doing so he would have been turning His back on God's will for his life. In a similar way, divorce may promise short-term relief, but in the long run, it too is often contrary to the will of God.

Even more strongly stated, basing a divorce solely on the "good" feelings it brings is really just a form of worshipping a false god. Chuck Colson does an excellent job of discussing this idea in his article, [*"Why Christians Divorce."*](#)

Myth #4

Surely a loving God would not want someone to stay in such an unhappy situation.

This myth is based on a humanistic presupposition that God's purpose in life revolves around me and my happiness.² One way to expose this way of thinking is to ask the person to unfold what it means to say, "A loving God wouldn't want people to suffer this way." Ask him to imagine that he has gone back in time two thousand years to the days of the persecuted church in Rome. He has been asked by a local church to go to the Colosseum and counsel the Christians who are about to be sent out to the lions. Would he really say to them, "Surely a loving God would not want Christians to suffer like this"? What would have happened to the early church if those Christians had believed such a notion? This kind of word picture may help people begin to understand that they have believed a lie.

It is crucial to help suffering people understand that God has something far more important in mind for His people than pleasant lives. His purpose is to conform us to the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). The Bible teaches that this requires pruning, melting, and purifying to burn away the dross in our lives, and this is often done through the furnace of suffering. Take them to Hebrews 11 or 1 Peter. The Bible contains many passages about the value and purpose of suffering. We can use those Scriptures to encourage people in their painful situations. For a good perspective on suffering, see Paul Tripp's booklet, [*Suffering: Eternity makes a Difference.*](#)

Important Caveat: Being willing to endure suffering for the sake of Christ and others does not mean that we should encourage others to stay in marriages that involve ongoing serious abuse, whether it be emotional, physical or sexual. In such cases, it is entirely appropriate to move the abused spouse and children to a safe location and to bring in whatever outside assistance is necessary to stop the abuse.

Myth #5

I know it's wrong, but God is forgiving. You have probably heard this sort of statement from many different people. Its antidote is Deuteronomy 29:19-21, where Moses warns the Israelites sternly (my paraphrase), "If you presume that you can sin deliberately and then just say magic words and God will forgive you, you are deceiving yourself and likely to incur painful discipline from God!"

It is a frightful thing to sin deliberately. Point people to the example of King David, who willfully sinned against God. God forgave David, but He left consequences that would grieve David for the rest of his life. "The sword will never depart from your house" (2 Sam. 12:10). David's baby died, and his sons continued to rape women and kill one another. David had to bear that on his conscience to his dying day.

And how do people know that God will actually give them a repentant heart after they persist in willful disobedience (see Heb. 3:7-13; 12:16-17; Eph. 4:30; Prov. 28:14)? How can they be sure that God will not turn his face against them and remove His blessings from their lives (Heb. 10:31; 1 Pet. 3:7, 11-12)?

Another way to pierce this myth is to ask a person to imagine that she needs some cash. So, she decides to rob a bank. She steals the money, then runs down the sidewalk and into an alley. It is clear that she has gotten away. Then she puts the money down and says, "God, I'm so sorry. It was wrong to rob that bank. Please forgive me. Thank You, Lord."

Ask her if she thinks she could just pick up the money and walk away. Most people will admit that she could not. What is the evidence of genuine repentance? The evidence is undoing the harm of the original wrong by picking the money up and taking it back to the bank.

Similarly, someone considering a sinful divorce should realize she will not be able to wipe away the wrong with a superficial confession. Instead, she would one day need to turn around and do everything possible to seek reconciliation and a restoration of the marriage.

If you are a Christian who wants to be “salt and light” for the Lord, God will give you opportunities to graciously speak his truth into other Christians’ lives. Understanding these excuses used to justify divorce will help you deal directly, lovingly, and biblically with people who are struggling. By God’s grace, when true motives are revealed, people will then turn back to the Lord and his church for help.

Endnotes

¹ R. C. Sproul does an excellent job of describing these myths in his book *The Intimate Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1986).

² For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Gary Thomas’s book, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

This article is based on a portion of the chapter entitled, “Church Discipline: God’s Tool to Heal and Restore Marriages,” written by Ken Sande. This chapter is included in the book *Pastoral Leadership for Manhood and Womanhood* (edited by Wayne Grudem and Dennis Rainey, Crossway Publishing, 2003).