

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | July 17, 2009



I have a question about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I was recently divorced without Biblical grounds. I know that Jesus said that the only grounds for divorce were infidelity. The church that I belong to also believes the same way.

My wife after divorcing me left the state and has asked me to not have any contact either with her or her daughter. I was wondering now am I to be a recluse from any relationship or what are my options. I recognize that divorce and separation are a thing of the heart and that I know that neither of us have been unfaithful as far as having any relationship with someone of the other sex. I also see where she has chosen to be faithful to her daughter as we were going to be reconciled and after her daughter came home from academy she sent me a letter saying that all plans for reconciliation were off. I feel that maybe the daughter had some influence on this decision. What are your conclusions and advise?

Thanks for your question. I cannot draw any specific conclusions about your situation, nor give specific advice as to what course you should take. Instead I will outline the Biblical principles involved from which I hope you will glean beneficial insights.

Your struggle is not yours alone. I cannot count the number of people who have come to me with this same question. Multitudes are struggling to find healing in the aftermath of failed marriages and sadly, all too often, rather than finding comfort from their friends, churches and Bibles, they experience fear, condemnation and ridicule. But God is a God of love and He is in the healing, restoring, and saving business – not the condemning business.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son... not... to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16,17).

So, as a starting point in this discussion we find ourselves under the umbrella of God’s love and grace, knowing with confidence God wants to heal our hearts and minds.

You said you were divorced “without Biblical grounds” and that “Jesus said that the only grounds for divorce were infidelity.” How would you define infidelity? It seems from your letter that you have concluded that infidelity is only caused by sexual contact with another person. Is that true? Is that Biblical?

Christian tradition claims that physical sexual relations with someone other than your spouse is what constitutes adultery and this is the only Biblical basis for divorce. While it is true that sex outside the marriage relationship does constitute adultery, it is not true that physical sex is the only way to break the marriage covenant. Those who take this traditional view cite Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:32 as proof for their position:

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. Matthew 5:32

If we take the above passage to mean only physical sex, we miss Jesus’ point, for Jesus is teaching unfaithfulness of heart, not just body. It is interesting that those who take the approach that Biblical grounds for divorce is only physical sex ignore what Jesus said just four verses prior:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matthew 5:27,28

According to Jesus’ standard, does someone have to engage in physical sexual relations to commit adultery, to be unfaithful? What is the issue? It is an issue of the heart; not the body.

When a man and woman marry, committing themselves to love, honor, and cherish each other, forsaking all others until death, do they commit only their genitals to one another? In other words, is genital contact the only way to break such a vow? When we betray our spouse in heart and give our heart to another, we commit adultery and this can take many forms.

Consider a married soldier who steps on a land mine and loses both legs and his genitalia, but survives. During the many months of rehabilitation he falls in love with his nurse. And when he leaves the hospital, instead of going home to his wife, he moves in with his nurse. He loves her with his heart, spends his time, energy, resources and money providing for her. They sleep in the same bed but, because of his injury, he never has physical sex with her. Is he committing adultery?

In the Old Testament, God repeatedly called the rebellious Hebrews an “adulterous” people, why? Hear

what God said through Jeremiah:

“Oh, that I had in the desert a lodging place for travelers, so that I might leave my people and go away from them; for they are all adulterers, a crowd of unfaithful people. They make ready their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the land. They go from one sin to another; they do not acknowledge me,” declares the Lord. Jeremiah 9:2,3

What does God say adultery is? Unfaithfulness! Notice what the people are doing. They are turning their hearts away from God.

Can unfaithfulness be revealed by sex with another? Absolutely. But is sex with another the only way to reveal unfaithfulness? No. And this is the mistaken idea many cling to when dealing with this issue.

Would a wife who tries to murder her husband be guilty of unfaithfulness? Would this constitute “Biblical” grounds for divorce? Listen to what James says:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker. James 2:10,11

Would the person who tries to murder their spouse be a lawbreaker? Is it a different law or the same law as committing sexual adultery? And what is that law?

Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40

Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:10

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. James 2:8

The law of God is the law of love. Marriage is designed by God to be the place where finite beings enter, as closely as possible, to the perfect love of God.

As God exists in the Triune, perfection of other-centered giving, beneficence and love, so too, God designed humanity to experience this perfect love. The two shall become one, two separate beings united in love through the indwelling of God’s Spirit – a triune perfection of love.

Satan hates this and wants to tear it apart. He wants to destroy the law of love. Divorce occurs when love breaks down, when fear and selfishness dominate in the heart, and when we are more concerned with getting our own way than the welfare of the other. Any spouse whose heart is against their partner, whose heart is closed, hardened and cold, who would exploit, dominate, control, take advantage, and who remains unrepentant, calloused and cruel, regardless of sexual contact, is unfaithful to his or her marriage covenant.

God’s heart is constantly for you, for your welfare and eternal happiness. God wants you to experience the fullness of His love, which includes a healthy, God-blessed marriage. The question would be, do you trust God enough to put your life in His hands and say, “Heal me, restore Your image in me fully. Let me fulfill Your will for my life. Enable me to love as You love. And, if it be Your will that I marry again,

prepare me to be ready to meet whomever You have in store for me”?

If you take this humble approach, then I suggest that before pursuing any new relationship that you spend a long time, prayerfully and carefully exploring what happened that led to the end of your marriage. What contributions did you make to its demise? What lessons can you learn? What areas do you need to repent of and change? How can you mature, grow, and advance in God’s grace so that you will become the person God would have you be?