

Common Questions Regarding Divorce and Remarriage

Scripture: Matthew 5:23–24; Mark 10:11–12; 1 Corinthians 7:10–11

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Some of the most common questions facing Christians in the local church deal with issues of divorce and remarriage. The following are questions that routinely come up and must be answered by the elders of any local church with great wisdom and skill. The answers given are *biblical guidelines* that can assist in the process of helping believers.

What is the time frame for a divorced person to remarry, especially if that person's former spouse has not remarried?

The answer is a critical one because many people are in the category of the divorced, regardless of how that divorce occurred. The first place to go in Scripture in answering this question is where the apostle Paul says: "To the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Although this passage is speaking to the fact of a divorce, not the time frame, it does give us a most important word on remarriage.

Remember, remarriage is permitted for the faithful partner when the divorce was on biblical grounds. So those Christians who divorce because of unrepentant sexual sin by their spouse are allowed by God to marry another believer (Matthew 5:32; 19:9), as are those who have been forsaken by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15). Those who divorce on any other grounds have sinned against God and their partners, and for them to marry another is an act of "adultery" (Mark 10:11-12).

That is why Paul says that a believing woman who sinfully divorces should "remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If she repents from her sin of unbiblical divorce, the true fruits of that repentance would be to seek reconciliation with her former husband (Matthew 5:23-24). The same is true for a man who divorces unbiblically (1 Corinthians 7:11). The only time such a person could remarry another is if the former spouse remarries, proves to be an unbeliever, or dies, in which cases reconciliation would no longer be possible.

The Bible also gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If the divorce was not on biblical grounds and there is still a responsibility to reconcile, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer (Mark 10:11-12).

The key to answering this question in any particular case is to ascertain if the divorced person has had a *biblically allowable divorce*. If they have, then they are free at any time to remarry, but only "in the Lord" (see 1 Corinthians 7:39). This is the only person who is free to remarry. If someone has unbiblically divorced their spouse, they may not remarry, but rather should seek to be reconciled to their former spouse.

If, on the other hand, an innocent spouse has had a divorce initiated against them, they must seek

the wisdom of the elders in determining their present and future marital status. Some elders/leaders could determine, upon the evaluation of an individual's situation, whether the innocent party is free to remarry. The all-important factor is the elders' examination of each case and their biblical wisdom on the matter.

May a Christian who is divorced remarry if he was divorced as a non-Christian?

Yes. Paul explicitly says in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28: "Are you bound [married] to a wife? Do not seek to be released [divorced]. Are you released [previously been divorced] from a wife? Do not seek [to be married to] a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin [one who has never before been married] marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you."

Those two verses, however, apply only to those who were divorced before becoming Christians. Paul had told the Corinthians earlier that "each man must remain in that condition in which he was called [to salvation]" (1 Corinthians 7:20). But he follows that up immediately with the statement that even though they have become Christians while in the state of divorce, they should stay that way. But if they nonetheless choose to remarry, he is not suggesting they are in sin. They should however, marry only a believer.

What is the time frame for the innocent party in the marriage relationship to wait and see if their spouse is going to repent of their sexual sin before divorcing?

There can be no standard answer to this question. The ultimate perspective is, of course, what Hosea did with his adulterous wife, Gomer. He remained with her, choosing to express his covenant love, even though she was a perpetual adulterer. God brought her to the place of repentance and Hosea was honored for his commitment.

Having said that, many who have an unrepentant, sexually sinful marriage partner choose not to remain in the relationship. And if they choose not to remain in the marriage, God will allow them to divorce their spouse. What the innocent spouse must do is appeal to the leadership of their church for the elders' biblical wisdom on both the nature of the unrepentant spouse's relationship to Christ, as well as the pattern of the sin and any church discipline, which would be involved, to take its course.

If the sinful spouse is not a professing believer, the innocent spouse should choose to show Christ's love for sinners, but should they choose instead to divorce, it should be carried out with the full knowledge and allowance of their spiritual overseers.

What if someone has had multiple marriages and divorces? Can they ever hope to know what their marital status is and what the Lord would have them do to be pleasing to Him?

In one sense, those who have had multiple marriages and divorces are no different than those who have committed many other types of sins. They must confess all known sin and seek at the moment of their salvation to walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord. The consequences of marital infidelity though, are often enormous (especially if children are involved). One may need to financially support several sets of families, or work toward mending all kinds of broken relationships, including

blended family concerns.

To answer the question specifically, it is sometimes impossible to “unscramble the egg,” given all of the intertwined relationships. The general answer from Scripture is this: Paul admonishes us to stay in the state we were in when we were called to salvation (see 1 Corinthians 7:20, 24). In that chapter, Paul teaches that one is to stay in the state they were in when Christ called them to Himself. So whether you are single, having never married (Paul calls this state a “virgin”—1 Corinthians 7:25-27), married, divorced (Paul calls these the “unmarried”—vv. 8-9), or widowed, *stay in that state*.

In other words, whether you are presently married or unmarried, endeavor to serve God in that state with all your heart. If you are single—however it has occurred—heed Paul’s own lifestyle of singleness to optimally glorify God. This way you will be able to serve Christ in an unhindered fashion (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 28-35).

Some may assume, given the above paragraph, that having been previously divorced, they are forbidden to remarry. Such a prohibition, however, does not appear to be the case. Paul tells the previously married and widows, “It is good for them if they remain, even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

Paul goes on to say, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet, such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you” (1 Corinthians 7:27-28). Paul himself says that it is better if they remain single; however, he acknowledges this is not a command, but a concession (1 Corinthians 7:6, 28, 32-35, 39-40). If they should choose to marry, they must marry “only in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Because Paul allows for remarriage, one must not assume that they can confess Christ and divorce their believing spouse in order to marry another. Paul gives a strong prohibition to those who are in Christ and who are presently married: *they must not divorce*. “But to the married, I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave [divorce] her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

If you should unbiblically divorce in this manner, you have the responsibility to remain unmarried and seek reconciliation to your spouse. The only exception to this, of course, is when your spouse is choosing to live in unrepentant adultery. Remember, remarriage is permitted for the faithful partner when the divorce was on biblical grounds. So those Christians who divorce because of unrepentant sexual sin by their spouse are allowed by God to marry a believer (Matthew 5:32; 19:9).

If you are unsure about the biblical position of your particular situation, you should seek the counsel of your church leadership before you embark on another relationship.

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