

Neil Powell (Ed. Richard Collins)

What does God think of divorce?

Divorce is a subject with an increasing amount of focus in the church. A painful and often controversial subject, it's important for Christians to think through how God views this issue. So, what does God think of divorce? It's an issue on which he holds a very strong opinion.

He hates it. Why?

The faithfulness of God means that he hates divorce — Malachi 2:10-16

God is a God of faithfulness who keeps his covenant promise with his people. In the above passage, the prophet states that the Lord God hates unfaithfulness in all its forms. In verse 11, he accuses Judah of having broken faith.

Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god.

- Malachi 2.11.

Then in verse 14, he goes further in explaining why divorce is abhorrent to him.

You ask why? It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her. She is your

partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his.

- Malachi 2.14

God disapproves of us divorcing wrongly. He opposes us because we are breaking faith with him when we break faith with our spouse. His rationale for why he hates divorce goes further in verse 16.

The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the Lord Almighty.

- Malachi 2.16

It's a stern warning.

The grace of God means he hates divorce - Hosea 1 & 3

Nowhere does the Bible demonstrate that lesson more than in the book of Hosea. John McArthur, in his book *The Divorce Dilemma*, writes, 'the entire book of Hosea is a picture of God's forgiving and patient love for his people. A love that is dramatized by the prophet Hosea's forgiving and patient love for his wife Gomer.' God calls on Hosea to go to the northern kingdom of

Israel and choose a wife whom he knows will be unfaithful to him.

The Lord said to him (Hosea), 'Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.' So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

- Hosea 1.2-3.

Israel committed spiritual adultery against God and he is rightly angry with her unfaithfulness. He is angry, like a wife who comes home to find another woman in bed with her husband. However, God's response to Israel's sin is not to terminate the relationship. Rather, as one commentator puts it, his tactic is 'the artful strategy of an ardent lover. He intends to allure her, rekindling the romance they enjoyed in their early years together...He will entice her. He will draw her back.' The marriage will be saved because of the gracious and forgiving nature of God's love. In chapter three, we see Hosea living this love out in his marriage.

The Lord said to me, 'Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.' So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Then I told her, 'You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you.'

- Hosea 3.1-3.

We see the prophet here giving us a picture of God's love for Israel. It's a powerful metaphor, which is heartbreakingly true, yet glorious in its meaning. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, 'God has never anywhere commanded anybody to divorce.' Even after serious sin, even after repeated covenantal unfaithfulness, divorce is not inevitable. Not for the Christian. The truth is, in the gospel, God has given each of us resources to stay in our marriages, even when others who are non-Christians might leave.

Now this is not to say that Christians should passively accept unfaithfulness by their spouses. We shouldn't be indifferent to sin in a marriage. Wherever there is sin, we should call on each

other to recognise it, confess it and repent of it. But where there is *true* repentance, then restoration is possible and should be worked for – to the glory of God.

As elders, we believe that divorce ought to be avoided if at all possible. And that means that we will always discourage divorce and work, wherever possible, towards reconciliation. This is because reconciliation and restoration are right at the heart of God's love for us in Christ. The Bible calls on us not just to honour our vows, but also to exhibit the character of Christ in our lives.

Given that God hates divorce, we must do all we can to remain faithful and protect our marriages. When Jane and I were dating, as a birthday present, she spent far too much on a gift for me: a bonsai tree. I was thrilled, really genuinely delighted. I admired it, showed it off to others, talked about it at work, but I didn't have a clue how to look after it. And rather than feed it, water it, prune it and tend to it, I neglected it. As a result, I killed it. Because of my lack of care and attention, within months it was dead.

In the same way, marriage is a living thing. If you don't give it the time and attention it needs and deserves, you might just kill it. No-one sets out to get divorced. I haven't met one Christian who has got married with the thought that the marriage won't survive. But we ought to fear the death of a marriage. Look what Malachi says, not once but twice.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

- Malachi 2.15

So how do you protect and care for your marriage? It seems to me that you should do three things:

Prioritise your marriage.

Perhaps the biggest threat to a marriage is simply putting other things before it. I must admit that in twenty years of marriage, that has sometimes been true of my marriage. So block out time for each other; take regular holidays; keep date nights, and pray together. For Jane and I, these things have not always been at the top of our

agenda. However, for the past four years, we have prayed together almost every day. Make time for sex, speak tenderly to each other. Express to your beloved the reasons why you love them. Be specific.

Feed your marriage or you'll kill it.

In addition, learn to distinguish between working *in* your marriage for working *on* your marriage. There's a critical difference. Many marriages give the appearance of strength because husband and wife are busy sacrificing and serving. Yet the reality is that they're working towards something that ought to be subordinate to the marriage. That could be building a home, raising a family, pursuing a career. It's not enough to have a shared goal that keeps you busy. Married couples need to work directly on building intimacy, enjoying each other. Being busy together is just not enough.

Protect your marriage.

First, protect it from other good things, for example church activity, work overload, the competing demands of the children. One of the most important things you can do for your children is to show them – in ways they understand – that your marriage comes before their demands. This might be in simple and small ways – such as not letting them interrupt a conversation.

Second, protect it from bad things. Take marital sin seriously. Men in particular must beware of pornography – so download some accountability software. Remember Joseph in Potiphar's household. Potiphar's wife came looking for him and he knew when to flee. Especially be on your guard against office affairs. Be aware that we can be unfaithful without actually sleeping with another partner. A marriage can be destroyed when we find ourselves becoming intimate at work with a person of the opposite sex, sharing details of our lives which should belong only to our spouses.

Find support for your marriage

Most importantly, find support from God. As well as praying together regularly, cultivate a godly desire to pray for your spouse. Find support from the church. As a church, we want to offer pastoral

support at the *earliest* possible opportunity for any marriage in difficulty.

How many people die of diseases who simply present too late to the doctor? A friend of mine had a growth on his neck. He was a bright student, physically strong, and he thought he was immortal. Yet he was naïve. One summer, we attended the same summer camp where a doctor was a member of the team. For ten days, this doctor pestered my friend, telling him, 'you need to get that checked out.' So he did. He went to his GP, then to a specialist and sure enough, it was serious. He had cancer.

Fortunately, the operation was successful and he made a full recovery.

Marriage is a gift from God. It's a precious, living thing, which he cherishes. As a result, we need to value it as he does. When marriages go off the rails and the prospect of divorce becomes a reality, great pain ensues. We need all the wisdom we can get from God's Word.

In my next article, I'll be addressing the question, 'When can a Christian divorce their spouse?'

Neil Powell

Neil Powell is the City of London Director of City to City U.K. and a chair of City to City Europe, a church planting organization.

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