

*Marriage,  
Reconciliation,  
Divorce and  
a possible  
New Marriage*

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# Marriage, Reconciliation, Divorce and a possible New Marriage

In this short essay (short for this topic!) I propose twelve Biblical principles that may provide guidance in answering questions such as: Does God allow divorce? If He does, under what circumstances? And if He does, does God also allow a new marriage after a divorce?

**Summary:** The consistent teaching of Scripture is that marriage is a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman. The options for a Christian couple when facing serious marital difficulties are to separate or to reconcile. God hates divorce. But under certain conditions He has allowed it, namely persistent sexual immorality. Here I argue that persistent abandonment is also a God-allowed reason. Divorce for a God-allowed reason is sad, painful, but not a sin. It breaks a marriage covenant and therefore opens the possibility of a new marriage. Just because a divorce is allowed by God does not mean that the couple should or has to divorce. The best path is always to forgive, make serious changes, and reconcile. Even if they have the freedom to divorce, some believers will choose to separate and live alone, hoping and praying that one day God will touch their partner's heart. Others will choose to live alone and devote the rest of their lives to the Lord's service

To marry, get divorced or enter a second marriage in violation of God's revealed will is rebellion, a serious sin. A believer should not do so. If it has already been done, progress requires recognition of sin, true repentance and confession. Because of Christ's sacrifice, all sin can now be forgiven, including relationship sins. That is the wonderful gospel message. True repentance will lead to correcting what can be corrected. Some situations can't be reversed. The Holy Spirit desires to guide the individual and the local church on how to redeem each complex situation. No person or condition is beyond the grace of God.

Some Christians affirm that the Bible is not to be *interpreted* but *obeyed*. This sounds good but is it correct? The reality is that every Bible text needs to be interpreted before it can be obeyed. Consider these clear instructions of the Lord Jesus: "*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away*" (Mat. 5:29-30). Without interpretation, many of us would be walking around with one eye and one hand. What did the Lord mean when he said this? Since all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16), interpretation requires us to compare Scripture with Scripture. To understand God's thoughts on marriage, divorce and remarriage, we must also begin with interpretation. And then we must ask for God's grace and strength to obey.

This study can be misused by those believers who are already determined to divorce or remarry and seek justification to do their own will. We want to honour marriage (Hebrews 13:4). We want to promote forgiveness, serious change and reconciliation. But sometimes,

because of bad decisions and hardness of heart, the restoration of a marriage is no longer possible. What should be done then?

This study seeks to help you think **biblically** and **pastorally** about these painful and complex matters. As in the life of the Lord Jesus, **grace** and **truth** must always go together (John 1:14, 17). To illustrate the application of some of these principles, I use some examples lived during nearly three decades of mission related work. To protect their identity, I have changed names and some circumstances in these stories. You do not need to agree with these examples to benefit from the principles.

## OLD TESTAMENT TEACHINGS

Our task as Christian believers is not to develop a comprehensive set of 'Christian life rules' to complement or replace the Law of Moses. There is an important difference between the Old covenant and the New covenant, between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of God brought by Jesus Christ (Mark 1:14; Luke 16:16). God's dealing with **Israel** was based on grace and characterized by **laws** and commandments. It was a rule-based system with corresponding blessings and punishments. God's dealing with us Christians, the **church**, also has some directives and commandments, but is based on His amazing **grace** and characterized by the guidance and workings of the Holy Spirit in individuals and in churches.

In studying Scripture, we seek to understand and submit to directives and commandments clearly given to guide the life of born-again believers and seek to discover our God's heart on different matters. With this mindset we look at the Old Testament to see what it reveals of God's thoughts about marriage, divorce, and the possibility of a new marriage. That is why I refer here to principles and not rules. An explanation follows each principle. To apply principles, you need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Given that only God sees everything (motives, attitudes, family and social repercussions, and complete circumstances), I can imagine that the Holy Spirit may sometimes guide one church to act in a different way than another in what we would appear to be a similar situation. This fact makes me slow to judge and criticize, especially in areas where the responsibility lies with others.

To follow Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit, as an individual or as a church, you will need the conviction, strength and power that only the Spirit of God can give.

**Principle #1:** God's design and will is that marriage should be a lifelong covenant.

God's initial and perfect design for marriage is stated in **Genesis 1:27, 2:23-24** and is repeated by the Lord Jesus in the gospels and by the apostle Paul in his letters. Marriage is a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14) which unites a man and a woman **during their life on earth** and this covenant should not be broken (Rom. 7:1-2).

**Principle #2:** The act of divorce is a sin unless it has a God-permitted cause.

Every divorce is caused by sin. Usually because of the selfishness and hardness of heart of one or both spouses. But the act of getting divorced is a sin only if it is carried out for reasons (or with the attitude) not permitted by God. Divorce on legitimate grounds is sad and painful, but not a sin. We know that it cannot be a sin for these three reasons:

- (1) God commanded it: Due to the evils of idolatry, God commanded some Israelites to divorce their foreign wives. The whole assembly agreed (Ezra 10:10-12). God would never command someone to sin.
- (2) God did it: Figuratively God saw Himself as the husband of Israel (Isaiah 54:4). Because of their unfaithfulness, God gave Israel a certificate of divorce (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8). We know that God will never sin, not even figuratively.
- (3) God formalized it: God gave instructions on how to formalize a divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). God would never give instructions on how to formalize a sin.

**Principle #3:** Death and a divorce on God-permitted grounds terminate a marriage.

**Principle #4:** Death and a divorce on God-permitted grounds opens the possibility for a new marriage.

**Principle #5:** A second marriage is a genuine marriage.

The central scripture is **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**.

*“If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a **certificate of divorce**, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house **she becomes the wife of another man**, and her **second husband** dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her **first husband**, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again...”*

When a person got divorced for a cause permitted by God, he or she was free to marry another person. This was normal practice. A God-permitted divorce breaks the marriage covenant. Upon receipt of the certificate of divorce, the woman was free to marry someone else.

This text also makes clear that the second marriage was a real and true marriage. If this second marriage ended in death or divorce, the woman could not return to the man of the first marriage. This would encourage a hot-tempered spouse to think carefully before seeking divorce.

I conclude that, with the certificate of divorce, the first marriage ceased to exist, that a second marriage is possible, and that this second marriage was a genuine marriage.

As we shall see later, this conclusion harmonizes with the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 19:9, *“I tell you that anyone who **divorces his wife**, except for marital unfaithfulness, **and marries another woman** commits adultery.”* In other words, God allows the 'innocent party' to divorce and marry another person if the cause of divorce is fornication (porneia).

It is worth remembering that under the Law of Moses, when adultery was proved, it had to be punished by death. *“If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel”* (Deut. 22:22). The 'innocent party' would always be free to remarry, not because of divorce but because of the death of their guilty marriage partner. It is reasonable to conclude then, that the reasons for giving a certificate of divorce mentioned in Deuteronomy 24 must be reasons other than proven adultery. Then, as today, adultery is sometimes difficult to prove.

In **Exodus 21:7-11** we find instructions in the Law of Moses about handling Jewish female slaves bought to be a partner or wife: *“If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself”,* he was to allow someone else to redeem her, that is, to pay for her freedom. But *“If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and*

*marital rights* (sexual intimacy).” If he neglected her in this way, he was to release her as a free woman. Some Bible scholars see in these instructions the heart of God for wives **abandoned** by their husbands, a theme that the apostle Paul takes up in 1 Corinthians 7.

**Principle #6:** God always hates divorce.  
But sometimes God allows divorce.

**Malachi 2:14-16** urges the Israelites not to divorce their wives: “*So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.*” We are then told that **God hates divorce**. The fact that God sometimes allowed a husband to give his wife a certificate of divorce, shows us that God sometimes allows what He hates. It’s like a **surgeon** who hates amputating legs. But sometimes, in serious situations, the surgeon amputates a leg to prevent a worse situation. Sometimes the surgeon does what he hates doing. Similarly, in some serious and special cases, God permits the divorce that He hates.

**Why does God hate divorce?** In the Malachi text quoted above, divorce is condemned “*Because he was seeking godly offspring*” (2:15). Those who suffer most in a divorce are usually the children, and children have a special place in His heart (Mat. 18:2-6). Furthermore, God designed the marriage relationship to exemplify the sacrificial love and lasting commitment between Christ and you and me, between Christ and the Church. In His eyes, those who divorce, break that “*profound mystery*” (Eph. 5:32). And God hates that! The lifestyle of a Christian, including his or her marriage, should adorn the doctrine. Scripture is consistent in stating that marriage is designed to be a lifelong covenant. If you think lightly about divorce and what God hates, you probably have never met the God of the Bible. The apostolic recommendation would be: “*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith*” (2 Cor. 13:5).

## NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS

**The Historical Context:** When the Lord Jesus and the apostles taught about marriage, divorce was accepted and commonly practiced among Romans, Greeks, and Jews. It was also commonly accepted that after a divorce, the divorced persons were free to marry someone else. The Jews based this practice on their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-2.

What divided opinion among the Jews were the possible **reasons** for divorce. In essence, what divided them was how to interpret the expression, “*becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce*” (24:1). What could ‘*displeasing*’ and ‘*something indecent*’ mean? Followers of Rabbi **Shammai** claimed that this text only permits a divorce on the grounds of serious sexual sin. Followers of Rabbi **Hillel** claimed that the text permits divorce ‘for any and every reason.’ This last interpretation was very popular back then, as it is also today. Even the disciples of the Lord Jesus believed that the interpretation of Rabby Hillel was correct (Mat. 19:3-10).

Knowing that these two ways of thinking existed among the Jews, helps us understand the questions the Pharisees asked about divorce and the answers the Lord Jesus gave them. The Pharisees wanted to know whether the Lord Jesus supported Shammai’s interpretation or Hillel’s. How did the Lord Jesus respond in the Gospels?

**Principle #7:** A divorce is permissible if one spouse persists in a serious sexual sin.

In **Matthew 5:31-32**, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus repeats the words from Deuteronomy 24, that if a man divorces his wife, he must give her a certificate of divorce so that she can prove that she is free from that marriage. Then he adds something very important: that if the cause of divorce **is not 'marital unfaithfulness'** (the Greek word is *porneia*, which includes all illicit sexual activity, that is, all sex outside marriage), **then** to marry again would be an act of adultery, *"and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."* In other words, the Lord Jesus explains and applies the instructions of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1-2 this way: persistence in a serious sexual sin is legitimate cause for a divorce, and divorce for a non-legitimate reason does not break the marriage bond.

In **Matthew 19:3-9** the Pharisees asked him, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"* In other words, do you support Hillel's interpretation? The Lord Jesus responds by quoting from the book of Genesis with **God's initial and perfect plan**: that marriage is God's invention (not a human social invention), that God unites man and woman when they get married, that marriage is for life, and that man **can**, but **should not** separate what God has joined together.

Does this mean that divorce is never permitted? The Pharisees remind the Lord Jesus that divorce and a new marriage was allowed in the Law of Moses (Deut. 24:1-2). The Lord responds by repeating what He taught in the Sermon on the Mount: that if the cause of divorce is not *porneia* (all sex outside of marriage), remarriage would be an act of adultery. In other words, when persistent *porneia* is involved, the marriage covenant may be broken: *"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery"* (v.8,9). In other words, if there is persistent *porneia*, (a) the marriage covenant may be broken, and (b) in this case, one can remarry without this new union being considered adulterous.

In **Mark 10:1-12** the Lord Jesus explains **God's initial and perfect plan**, that marriage is for life and that *"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."* In **Luke 16:18** he repeats, *"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*

**Do these Scriptures contradict each other?**

Today, as in the past, some believers quote the words of the Lord Jesus in Mark and Luke to affirm that divorce is not permitted in the Bible, and that whoever marries a divorced person lives in adultery. But the Lord Jesus' words in Matthew should also inform our conclusion. Do these words in Mark and Luke contradict the teachings of the Lord Jesus in Matthew? Clearly not! Mark and Luke present **God's initial and perfect plan**, that is, **the general rule**. God always desires to see forgiveness, serious changes, and reconciliation, and not a divorce. Matthew also affirms **God's initial and perfect plan** and then reminds us that this **general rule of marriage** may have exceptions.

**General Rules:** In the Scriptures we note that general rules are often followed by exceptions. For example, in Exodus 20:13 the general rule is 'you shall not kill'. It is a very clear commandment. But elsewhere the Israelites are told that there are evils that must be punished by death, such as crimes. In Deuteronomy 21:18-22 the people of Israel were called by God to stone a stubborn and rebellious son. The Israelites were also required to kill in war. It is

evident that the general rule 'you shall not kill' had several exceptions. Similarly does the general rule of marriage.

### What did the apostle Paul write about divorce?

In **Romans 7:1-4** we read, *"Do you not know, brothers, for I am speaking to men who know the law, that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? **For example**, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from **the law of marriage**. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God."*

What the apostle Paul is teaching in Romans 7 is that when a person dies, he is released from the law. The apostle uses **the general rule of marriage** to **illustrate** this, namely, that a woman is under 'the law of marriage' as long as her husband is alive. The theme of Romans 7 is not marriage and divorce. That theme is addressed by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians.

**Principle #8:** The fact that one of the marriage partners is an unbeliever is not a legitimate reason for divorce.

**Principle #9:** The fact that the unbelieving partner has abandoned the home is a legitimate reason for divorce.

In **1 Corinthians 7** the apostle Paul answers a variety of questions asked by believers in the church in Corinth about living alone, marriage, divorce, and the possibility of remarriage. These believers were especially looking for apostolic guidance on what to do in some special cases: that of **mixed marriages**, that is, when one was a believer and the other not, and that of **messy marriages**, that is, when someone comes to Christ with a relationship history that conflicts with God's revealed will. The apostle's answers can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Single and widowed (v.8-9): He recommends that they use their freedom to serve the Lord.
- (2) Married believers (v.10-11): He commands Christian couples who are in difficulties not to divorce and therefore not to remarry. Their options are to separate or to be reconciled.
- (3) Mixed marriages (v.12-16): This is one of the 'special cases' that, according to the apostle Paul, was not covered in the teachings of the Lord Jesus. To provide guidance, the Holy Spirit inspires the apostle with a new revelation, *"I, not the Lord"* (v. 12). The mere fact that one in the marriage is an unbeliever is not a sufficient reason to divorce. But *"if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound (constrained by the marriage covenant) in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace"* (v.15). The key word here is the directive 'let him leave'. If the unbeliever has already left the relationship, there is nothing the believer can do to stop the unbeliever. **They are already separated**. They are living separated lives. What still binds them together is their marriage covenant. My conclusion is that the 'let him leave' followed by 'the believer is not bound' points towards a 'legal separation', that is, a divorce.



**Omaira:** While working with others in the formation of a new local church, Omaira, a lady in her early thirties began to come to the church together with her 2 children. She was converted, baptised and began to help in the church. Her unbelieving husband had left for the south-west of Colombia in search of work. This is a dangerous drug producing and guerrilla-controlled area. Since he left 7 years ago, he had not returned, not even phoned. Had he settled down with another woman there? Had he been killed? (common among new arrivals in that area). Bringing up 2 children as a single mother is financially difficult in Colombia. A Christian man began to show interest in her and was willing to marry her and care for her and her 2 children. She wanted to re-marry. What should we do as church? We concluded that this was one of those ‘special cases’ envisaged in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. The unbeliever had abandoned his home. We did not feel free to recommend divorce or to recommend remarriage. But we would not criticize or oppose. We mentioned that if she applied for divorce and remarried ‘in the Lord’, we would stand with her.

It is noteworthy that God expects more from a marriage of two believers than from a mixed marriage. God loves covenant faithfulness and hates divorce and therefore, wherever possible, He encourages forgiveness, serious changes, and reconciliation. That is why the apostle Paul ends the chapter reminding his readers that God’s **sovereign will** has always been that only death should break a marriage covenant (v.39). As believers, we have the Holy Spirit inside to help and strengthen us to live God’s will, also in our marriage.

**Fabiola and Alfonso:** Recently I spoke with Fabiola, a believer in her late 40’s. She married young, had a daughter, and then her husband left. She cared for the daughter alone. On leaving her more than 25 years ago, Alfonso, her husband, formed a new home with another woman and now has 3 children with her. But Alfonso has never shown any interest in getting divorced. He now has financial difficulties, and Fabiola is worried that, because they are still married, she might be held responsible for some of his debts. Furthermore, now that her daughter has left home to study at a university in Medellín, she feels lonely. She would find it difficult to grow old alone. Could she as believer take the initiative to divorce Alfonso? If the right person would come along, could she marry again? Based on our understanding of Scripture, we told her that if she chose that path, we would support her.

As stated earlier, God’s **sovereign will** for marriage is clear in Scripture. It does not include divorce. But we have seen that God sometimes allows divorce. Some Bible students refer to this as God’s **permissive will**. It is evident that the teachings of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul on marriage and divorce do not cover all possible scenarios.

(4) Messy marriages (v.17-24): The apostle Paul noticed, as does anyone who is engaged in pastoral work today, that many people come to Christ with a very messy and complex relational history. In the above verses, sandwiched between guidance on marriage matters, the apostle points out that some things cannot be changed at conversion (like being circumcised) and that other things can be changed (like gaining freedom from being a slave). Here the apostle Paul encourages Christians not to be circumcised and not to become slaves. The application for those who come to Christ with a messy marriage or messy relationship is clear: If anything can be put right, this should be done. But lived history often cannot be reversed. Should the church reject such? Should the church insist on separating messy family relationships? The general apostolic guideline is: *“Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him”* (v.20) and *“Brothers, each man, **as responsible to God**, should remain in the situation God called him to”* (v.24).



**Anton:** A few years ago, I was invited to help at a Bible conference in Surinam. While having lunch I asked Anton, an older believer at the conference, about his family. To my great surprise he told me that he had 3 wives, and children with all three of them. Each wife lived with their children in a different house on his large farm. He rotated every week between the houses. He was not the only one in his clan to live like this. How should a Bible-believing church deal with such a situation? I asked further. When he came to Christ, the local church recommended he choose one of the wives, live only with her, but care financially for all three. He chose the youngest one. During the months that followed, the other 2 wives followed him everywhere he went, weeping. Village locals strongly criticized his unkind and unfair behaviour toward these 2 women. They saw his conversion to Christ as something very negative. This is the clearest example of a ‘messy marriage’ I have come across. After careful thought, the local church concluded that he “*should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him*”. They recommended that he should continue to be a husband to his 3 wives. He was very welcome to be an active member of the church, but they informed him that he could not serve as an elder in the church, because “*the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife*” (1 Tim. 3:2). This would ensure that this ‘messy marriage’ would not become an example for others to follow.

**Note:** Suriname is a small country north of South America. Among Maroon communities, especially the Saramanka and Ndyuka (descendants of African slaves) who live in the jungle area of the country, polygamy (having several wives) is common. As you might expect, every Christian church teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman. But churches in Suriname face a challenge when a man converts to Christ who already has several wives – as in Anton’s case. These cases are still seen in several African and Muslim countries.

In **2 Corinthians 5:17** we read, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*” Some Bible students believe that this text provides grounds for discrediting a marriage if a couple was married before they became Christians. But marriage is God’s gift to all mankind and not just to God’s people. The atheist is just as married as the believer. When a couple marry, God ‘joins’ them together, whether they are Christians or not (Mat. 19:4-6). As we shall see later, the way of ‘grace and truth’ is found in recognizing and confessing sin, not in discrediting the validity of a pre-conversion marriage.

**Principle #10:** When a believer persists in ignoring God’s will and the admonitions of the church, this believer should be treated as an unbeliever.

Discussing the case of ‘mixed marriages’, when the unbeliever abandons the home, the apostle Paul **does not** conclude by saying that the believer is not “*bound in this case*,” but that the believer is not “*bound in such circumstances*” (in such cases or situations like this) (v. 15). I think this suggests that the apostle was aware that there may be other special cases where the recommendation given would be the same. Consider for example the following:

What to do in acute cases when the unbeliever has a long-term alcohol or drug addiction, or when he continues to subject his wife to physical or psychological violence? There will be cases where the innocent party’s life (and that of the children) is in danger and must seek refuge outside of the home. Technically the unbeliever has not separated, but his grave behaviour has caused the separation.

What to do in cases when the couple **both claim to be believers** and one of them separates or endangers the life of his partner? When a ‘carnal believer’ persists in a condition of carnality, ignoring the call of the Lord and the counsel of the church, the Word of God tells us that we are to treat this believer as a “*pagan*” (Mat. 18:15-17), as a “*wicked man*” (1 Cor. 5:11-13),

because “*he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever*” (1 Tim. 5:8). In these cases, I suggest that the instructions for ‘mixed marriages’ could also apply to situations where both claim to be believers, but one persists in living as an unbeliever.

**Ruby and Fernando:** Fernando was a university graduate, with a sharp mind and good at talking. When he came to our church I saw great potential in him. He made a confession of faith, was baptized, participated at the Lord’s table and sometimes preached the Word. He was a fast learner. Occasional drug use was his hidden sin. He managed to hide his ‘other life’ from the church and from Ruby. But after marriage, his unexplained disappearances became more obvious and frequent. His inability to hold down a job added stress to the relationship. He distanced himself from the church. He began to steal items from their home to finance his addiction. Ruby followed him discretely to see where he went to for 2 or 3 days in a row. He would spend days in ‘hollas’, low class drug and sex dens. Ruby now feared for her health. She refused to be intimate with him when he came home. She feared for their 3-year-old son when he took him out for hours on his own. They lived apart for a few years, but he always had reasons to visit and make their life miserable. The day came when she mentioned to us that she was considering divorce. She and her son needed a life without him. Should this be considered a marriage of two believers? Only God can tell what is in Fernando’s heart. We concluded that we should treat Fernando as an unbeliever. We told sister Ruby that if she chose to divorce him, we would be supportive.

Some Bible students see in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 other legitimate causes that could lead to divorce: “*But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat*” (5:11) and “*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God*” (6:9,10). Other Bible students expand the meaning of the Greek word ‘porneia’ (sex outside of marriage) to include harmful addictions such as pornography and masturbation.

Without wanting to minimize the harmful and painful effect that all these sins will have on a marriage relationship, I suggest not expanding on the two Biblical causes already stated (1) persistent porneia with another person(s) and (2) persistent abandonment. It is quite possible that the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 will eventually lead to porneia or abandonment of the home.

**Principle #11:** Where possible, every Christian couple should obtain a legally recognised marriage. But in God’s sight, a legally recognized marriage is not always *valid*, and a legally recognized marriage is not always *necessary*.

Most tribes and clans have their legal systems. Good rules that are given authority through laws that protect citizens’ rights and make good community life possible. Every country has its own laws to define and protect marriage. “*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established*” (Rom. 13:1). Every Christian couple should, therefore, submit to the law of their country and get married in a way that is legally recognized. In Colombia this may be done in a Public Notary, a Court of Law and in some recognized churches. Biblically, marriage is not just a private matter.

**Not always valid:** Sometimes a law of a country conflicts with Scripture. For example, a legal divorce may be granted when there are no Biblical grounds for one, or a legal marriage

certificate is granted for the union of two men or of two women. In such cases the apostolic recommendation is clear, *"We must obey God rather than men!"* and *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God"* (Acts 5:29; 4:19). To make sin legal does not make it less sinful or make it acceptable to God. As Christians we must be aware that sometimes legal documents are simply not valid in God's sight.

**What about couples who form a family together but are not legally married?** Are they living in fornication? The Lord Jesus said to the Samaritan woman *"The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband"* (John 4:18). Living together should not be seen as marriage, because it is not. Most societies distinguish between 'living together' and 'being married'. In Colombia, to protect the rights of women and children, a couple is considered common-law married (in Spanish 'Matrimonio de hecho') if it can be shown that they have lived together for two or more years. Society treats them as a married couple. Other countries have similar arrangements. How should the church respond? I suggest that if the couple are both Christians and there is no legal impediment to get married legally, they should do so. Not to do so could be considered sinful. Christians are called to honour marriage and to adorn the doctrine we profess. I would recommend such couples get married legally before they become active members of the local church.

**Is a legally recognized marriage always necessary?** Marriages in the Old Testament clearly existed and were recognized by God and society long before the creation of legal systems to define and protect them. Being a wife was clearly different from being a concubine (a stable relationship without marital rights) or a prostitute. When the church of Jesus Christ extended beyond Judaism, it encountered several gentile marriage and **quasi-marriage** traditions. Many slaves became Christians, so many that the apostle Paul felt it necessary to issue instructions to believing slaves and their masters (Eph. 6:6-9). At that time, in Roman law only free citizens could marry legally (Latin: *connubium*). Slaves were the property of the owner and could therefore not marry legally or take on any other legal commitments. With the owner's permission, a slave could live with a partner and have children (which would then belong to the mother's owner), or if he was a slave of some standing, he could be allowed to enter a *contubernium* (Latin word generally meaning 'companion') relationship with another slave. This was intended to be a lasting union modelled on marital affection (Latin: *affectio maritalis*) but could be dissolved at any moment by the slave owner. It was not equivalent to a legal marriage. What can we learn from how the early church baptized and incorporated converted slaves with their quasi-marital relationships into local churches? What did the apostles recommend?

**Not always necessary:** When the church begun, society made a clear distinction between slaves and free citizens. That is why the apostles stressed that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, *"for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal. 3:28). What then did the apostles recommend doing with slave couples and families with their quasi-marriage relationship? Nowhere in the New Testament are these slaves encouraged to separate, neither does Scripture suggest that these slaves were living in fornication. In 1 Corinthians 7, the chapter the apostle Paul devotes to teachings on marriage, he also gives guidance to believers who were free and also to those who were slaves:

*"Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? (some of them in quasi-married relationships) Don't let it trouble you, although if you can gain your freedom, do so (then they could marry legally). For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a*

*free man when he was called is Christ's slave" (v.20-22). Slaves were not to be considered of less value than the free person, neither should their quasi-marriage (informal marriage – because they had no other option) be a hinderance to their participation in church life.*

**Gisela and Alex:** We met this couple through two of their sons who began to attend our church youth group events. Soon also Gisela began to attend our church meetings. When the two sons expressed interest in baptism, so did their mother. At that point we discovered that Gisela and Alex, a friendly car mechanic, had lived together for nearly 30 years, had 3 boys together, but were not married. We baptized the sons but did not feel free to baptize Gisela. We had no doubt that she was now a born-again believer, but we did not want to baptize a believer who was 'living in fornication' or 'living in sin.' Over the years, we visited them several times. Gisela would gladly get married, but Alex resisted. He confided that he did not want to get married because a friend of his had a good relationship but that after he married, the relationship fell apart. He was kind and friendly, but he would not change his position. Years later I visited that local church and I asked the leadership about sister Gisela. She still lives faithfully with Alex and he still has not married her. But she has now joined another church in town, where she was baptized and is now happily serving the Lord among them. Looking back, I am now convinced that this other church better understood Scripture and God's heart for situations like these.

Note: It would not be right for Gisela to separate Alex, as that would destroy a family. After years of waiting, the one who is preventing the marriage is Alex. I think it is not right that an unsaved person can indefinitely hinder the progress of the believer. The situation is very different when both are believers. For them, to live together without marrying is to live in sin.

The early church taught believers to honour God's design for marriage. This teaching would include that living together 'as if married' violates God's design. It is a sin. Such couples would be encouraged to repent and separate or repent and get legally married. But then as today, **sometimes a legal marriage is simply not possible**, because of local administrative reasons (like among slaves in the Roman empire) or, more often, because the unbelieving partner opposes getting married. When a relationship has a history of being viewed socially as quasi-married, and especially if there are children involved, it is usually not wise to recommend separation. This may cause a greater evil. If after a prudent wait seeking a legal marriage has born no fruits through no fault of the believer, the apostolic recommendation would be to baptize and receive the believer in the local church.

**Principle #12:** Because of Christ's sacrifice, God always forgives every believer who comes to Him in sincere heartfelt repentance and confession of sin. Sins connected with marriage, divorce and remarriage are no exceptions. If God forgives, accepts, restores and uses repentant believers, the church would be wise to do the same.

When an *unbeliever* disobeys God, he sins because he is rebellious or **ignorant** (Eph. 4:17-21; 1 Peter 1:14). When a *believer* disobeys God, he usually sins because he is **rebellious**, he resists the Holy Spirit that lives within him. That disobedience can lead to a marriage outside of God's will, or a divorce not permitted by God or a remarriage that God describes as adultery. Does this type of sin render a believer or a couple unrestorable?

**Your life today:** If your marriage is going through difficult times, if you have experienced disrespect, infidelity or abandonment, I beg you not to use the knowledge of God's abundant grace to justify a fast divorce. If still possible, God's will for you is the way of forgiveness, serious changes, and reconciliation (Col. 3:12-13; 2 Cor. 5:18-19; Rom. 12:18-19). If you have

children, consider also their future. They usually suffer the most from the divorce of their parents. Temporal separation or reconciliation are your current options. Don't allow yourself to fall in love with another person. Don't take any step that you know in your heart that it displeases your loving Father. *"What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"* (Rom. 6:15). Have the humility to seek help early, either at your local church or with a Christian professional counsellor. Together you can seek God's will for your situation.

Be careful about taking a decision that you know violates God's will while thinking, "This is how I achieve my goal and after a while I will repent and God will forgive me." The one who sins deliberately hardens his heart and makes it difficult to come to true repentance. If you are satisfied with what your rebellion has accomplished, your repentance may be superficial. *"Godly sorrow brings repentance..."* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

**Your past life:** Have you made relationship choices outside the will of God that are now irreversible? The only way forward is through sincere heartfelt repentance and confession. *"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy"* (Prov. 28:13). God's Word is clear that if we truly humble ourselves, acknowledge and confess our rebellion, disobedience and sin, God promises to forgive: *"The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7). The blood of Christ is powerful enough to cleanse us from all the decisions we have made which conflict with the will of God, including a wrong marriage, a wrong divorce or a wrong remarriage. This forgiveness shows the power of Christ's shed blood and the magnitude of God's grace! After receiving God's forgiveness, you may have to change something in your way of living or live with some of the consequences caused by your sin. For example, a forgiven believer who has more than one wife could serve in the local church, but not as a church elder (1 Tim. 3:2).

**The local church:** How should we proceed as a church when someone marries or divorces or remarries outside the revealed will of God and now desires to be baptized, partake of the Lord's Supper, be part of the church or participate in a ministry? We know that in many cases it is not possible to reverse what has been done. What would Christ, the head of the Church, want us to do?

1. Remember that there is no virtue in God's sight in being more generous or stricter than what He has chosen to reveal in Scripture. Excluding someone Christ would have eat at His table, is as wrong as consciously welcoming an evil person.
2. Do not let tradition ('we have always or never done it this way') or fear of criticism determine your decisions. Elders will give account to the Chief Sheppard on how they have cared for each one of His sheep (Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:4).
3. The Bible does not provide specific answers for every situation. For some situations we find clear **instructions**, for others we must seek to apply the **principles** of the Word, and in every situation, we need to ask for and expect to receive the guidance of the **Holy Spirit**. The guidance and workings of the Spirit of God in such situations is no platitude. It is a reality and a necessity.
4. Sometimes you may consider holding a repentant person or couple back because you feel that their remorse or repentance does not go deep enough (does yours and mine?).

Deeper consciousness of our sin and gratitude for God's grace and forgiveness can grow in time. That is also a work of the Holy Spirit.

5. Since decisions on these types of issues can divide a church, I recommend taking the time to study and discuss this topic at the leadership level and then with the congregation. The humble, repentant and patient attitude of the person or couple involved will greatly help this process.
6. Use every opportunity you find to teach and promote God's good design for marriage, a lifelong covenant union, a living picture of the relationship of Christ with His church. Celebrate weddings. Let the congregation see good and happy (not perfect) marriages.
7. Cultivate a sphere of truth and grace, respect for the authority of Scripture and wonder at how a holy God loves, enjoys the company and uses (not perfect) believers for His purposes. That is what is so amazing about grace!

**Camilo and Margarita:** My wife and I know this Colombian couple for many years. We both have been blessed with four children of a similar age. About 25 years ago, their marriage went through a crisis. It was painful for all involved. Given the seriousness of the issues involved, most would agree that there were Biblical grounds for a divorce. But they chose not to go down that road. They chose to forgive and work at restoring their marriage. Now, many years later, Camilo serves as an elder in a growing church, and together with Margarita they are involved in couples' ministries, and their children are following the Lord Jesus. Of course this is evidence of the grace of God. But I wonder how different it would be if they had chosen the 'easier' path of divorce.

To end, I share with you a recent new insight I had about Joseph. He and Mary were pledged to be married. He was already considered her husband. But before he and Mary came together sexually, "*she was found to be with child...*". That was clear evidence of adultery. The Law of Moses required that she be reported and stoned to death. But "*Joseph her husband... did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly*". **Why did Joseph think this way?** Did he not respect the Law of Moses? Did he love Mary more than God? Was Joseph a rather liberal Jew willing to ignore or adapt God's clear commandments? (Deuteronomy 22:13-29).

Until recently, I had not noticed that the Holy Spirit has answered that question for us: "***Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly***" (Mat. 1:18-20). We are told that Joseph's righteousness was the motor that led him to not apply the letter of the Law in this case. I find this very interesting! My prayer is that the Lord may help me grow more and more in understanding and living law and grace as He does.

"Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it...  
I press on towards the goal...  
And if on some point you think differently,  
that too God will make clear to you.  
Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

Philippians 3:13-16

## Epilogue

### Understanding God's ways of grace and truth

If you were looking for a list of 'Christian life rules' to apply to marital conflicts, rules to apply in your church, rules to complement or replace the Law of Moses, you will now be disappointed. Use your disappointment to open your heart to grow. Our good and wise God always has His ways. His ways cannot be reduced to a set of rules. This was not possible under the Law of Moses. In the dispensation of Grace in which we now live, God guides through His **Word** and His **Holy Spirit**.

Sometimes God is stricter and harder than what I would consider necessary. Like when He did not allow **Moses** to enter the promised land because he hit a rock twice (Num. 20:12); or when He killed **70 men** for looking inside the ark of God (1 Sam. 6:19) and **Uzzah** for stabilising the ark when the oxen stumbled (2 Sam. 6:7). I find this strictness also in the New Testament, when He killed the generous couple **Ananias** and **Sapphira** for a financial exaggeration (Acts 5:5) or when He killed a **number of believers** for participating at the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11:30).

But even more often I am impressed with the generous evidence of God's grace. Something deep inside of me is less gracious. I would want to do things differently. After **Aaron** built a golden calf and then defended his actions with a very childish story (Ex. 32:22-24), I would dismiss him or reduce him to a junior priest. But God made him High Priest! When **Jonah** rebelled and failed, I would seek his replacement. But God commissioned him again. When **David** committed adultery and then murder, he should have been stoned to death or removed from leadership in some exemplary way. But God allowed him to marry that woman and remain king of Israel. His songs were not even removed from the Book of Psalms! **Peter** denied the Lord, he swore that he was not one of His disciples, and yet the Lord restored him to a place of leadership in the church (John 21:15-17).

These expressions of God's amazing grace were designed to change the hearts of these men. Jonah was a slow learner, but I am sure that after being restored, Aaron, David and Peter looked at the inconsistencies and failings of God's people around them in a different way, through God's lens of grace. If you have never felt that you have desperately needed grace, you will probably be very strict and hard on your fellow believers. But if, like Aaron, David and Peter, you have received God's abundant grace, you will probably be more willing to give grace to others who also desperately need it. In time, as you continue to dispense God's grace, you will remember the words of the Lord Jesus himself: "*It is more blessed* (happy, joyful, delighting in God's favour) *to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35).

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.  
To him be glory both now and for ever! Amen"

2 Peter 3:18

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