

Why God Hates Divorce

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"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 2:16)

I've been going to church for years. I've heard thousands of sermons, Bible studies, and Sunday school lessons. I've also preached hundreds of sermons and done a great deal of teaching. In all that time I can never remember a sermon, a study, or a lesson on God's harsh words in Malachi 2:16: "I hate divorce."

"Hate" is strong language. Consider, for example, the rest of the verse: "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence." God makes divorce and blood-spattering violence moral equivalents.

In Proverbs 6:16-19 we read:

There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

No one would argue that the Proverbs list is exhaustive, but in it we see the kind of company divorce keeps in God's reckoning. He considers it a detestable thing.

It's also rampant in American culture and in the American Church.

This may explain why Malachi 2:16 doesn't come up too often. After all, if 34% of married evangelical Christians have experienced divorce after they have come to faith in Christ, it takes a combination of great bravery and extraordinary tact to preach on a text that may offend a third or more of any given congregation.

And besides, we ask ourselves, why would God hate divorce so much? Good question. Why does God hate divorce?

One obvious answer might be the damage it does to the people divorcing.

Economically divorce devastates most couples. There are increased living expenses and legal bills (often ongoing legal bills if children are involved). A 2002 study published in the Journal

of Marriage and Family indicated that being divorced resulted in a 73 percent reduction in wealth relative to those who are married.[\[1\]](#) This plays a part in emotional damage.

A friend and her husband who was a serial adulterer finally divorced. In spite of his philandering and her hard work to keep the marriage together, she said that more than anything else she felt like a complete failure--a feeling that stayed with her for years. And that's not a surprise. A US government report notes that studies have "documented that increases in depressive symptoms after divorce are long-lasting and that the prevalence of these symptoms remains elevated years after the marital breakup."[\[2\]](#)

The emotional damage is only exacerbated by so-called "no-fault" divorce. No-fault divorce, as Jennifer Roback Morse is a misnomer:

The more accurate, descriptive term would be "unilateral divorce." One person can unilaterally end the marriage. If the other person wants the marriage to continue, and is willing to work to keep it alive, that doesn't matter. The legal arrangement favors the person who wants to end the marriage, not the person who wants to work at keeping it together.[\[3\]](#)

Then spiritually, Christians who divorce have a need to justify God's "leading" them to divorce the very person God "led" them to marry in the first place. Of course, many unable to tolerate the cognitive dissonance this creates drop out of their churches and the faith altogether.

You would think, perhaps, that despite the emotional, physical, and financial sacrifices those who leave unhappy marriages would be happier in the end. You would be wrong. A 2002 study by the Institute on American Values stated:

Divorce was never associated with an increase in the emotional well-being of unhappily married spouses. Divorce did not make unhappily married spouses personally happier, or reduce depression, or increase personal mastery, or self-esteem... [\[4\]](#)

Divorce exacts a high price and returns little in long-term wellbeing. It damages the two spouses. But that is not the reason God hates divorce.

A second possible answer to why God hates divorce is the damage it does to children. Children of divorce are more likely to have behavioral problems and use illegal drugs. They are less likely to complete high school or attend college, obtain higher-status jobs, or report happiness as adults.[\[5\]](#)

When compared to children whose parents remained married, children whose parents divorced or separated were more likely to engage in sexual intercourse before age seventeen. [\[6\]](#) Girls whose parents divorced or separated early in childhood were more likely to get pregnant before age nineteen than girls whose parents remained together.[\[7\]](#)

Elizabeth Marquardt, herself a child of divorce, conducted a study of the inner lives of children of divorce. Marquardt writes:

Using hard data and a control group of young people from intact families, we discovered that divorce causes deep and lasting struggles for children even when they manage to survive it and look "fine."[\[8\]](#)

This is reflected in what becomes a negative feedback loop. Women who had experienced parental divorce in childhood were 59% more likely to divorce than women who had not experienced parental divorce. [\[9\]](#) The likelihood of divorce in marriages where both spouses come from divorced homes was 189% higher than in marriages where neither spouse had experienced a parental divorce.[\[10\]](#) These divorces, in turn, harm the next generation of children increasing the likelihood that they too will divorce.

This is just a small sample of the vast body of findings on how divorce harms children. But damage to children is not the reason God hates divorce.

The reason God hates divorce has to do with God's character and glory. Divorce tells an enormous lie about God. A couple breaking their marriage covenant implies that God is or at least may be a covenant breaker.

While marriage is important because it provides companionship, an outlet for sexuality, and procreation, marriage is preeminently a picture of God and his people. Throughout the Bible God refers to his people as his bride.

Take for example the Old Testament book the Song of Solomon. Is it a book celebrating erotic love between a man and a woman or is it a book about God's love for his people? The answer is it is a book celebrating erotic love between a man and a woman precisely because it is a book about God's love for his people.

Hosea was called to enact God's relationship with his people by marrying. His wife, Gomer, is described as "a woman of adultery" who left Hosea for another man who apparently enslaved her. God told Hosea to buy her back, that is, to redeem her the way God redeems us.

In the same way, God says of Israel, his unfaithful, idolatrous and, therefore, adulterous people:

"I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals;
she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers,
but me she forgot," declares the LORD.

Those prospects are not good, but that, of course, is not the end of the story.

"Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her....
"In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband';
you will no longer call me 'my master'....
I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.

I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD."
(Hosea 2:13, 16, 19, 20)

The relationship between God and Israel is described as a marriage and we find the same marriage imagery in the New Testament to describe Christ and his church.

In Ephesians 5, Paul launches into instructions for a Christian household beginning with husbands and wives. Wives are to be as the church is to Christ and husbands as Christ is to the church. "'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32).

The text so intermingles words about Christ and the church with words about marriage, that it is difficult to pull the two topics apart. I suspect that this was precisely what the apostle intended. In his mind, formed as it was by the Hebrew Scriptures, marriage between a man and a woman tells a truth about God and his people. Any particular marriage may tell the truth well or poorly, but every marriage tells the story.

Finally at the end of all things, when God's people are gathered and the Kingdom is fully come, the Revelation describes the celebration as a marriage supper.

"Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."
(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)
Revelation 19:6b-8

This truth is touched upon in traditional marriage ceremonies, but has been largely forgotten in an era where the focus of weddings seems to be limited to the bride and groom and their love for one another. The Book of Common Prayer wedding ceremony begins by reminding the couple and the congregation, "[Marriage] signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church..."[\[11\]](#) Nothing more important or profound can be said about marriage.

I believe this is one of the things that must be said if a wedding is to be genuinely Christian in its character. Just as each human is made in the image of God, every marriage is made in the image of God's faithfulness to his people. Small wonder it is "not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God."[\[12\]](#)

There are times when we all wonder whether or not God is faithful. We may know that he has made a covenant with us that is sealed by the blood of Christ shed on the cross, but we doubt. While we are unable to see his covenant faithfulness, we can see the covenant faithfulness of husbands and wives. Their fidelity and love--inconsistent and imperfect as they may be--are intended to be a mirror for the rest of us of God's perfect fidelity and love.

Divorce smashes the mirror and in doing so portrays God's fidelity and love as fickle and changeable rather than immutable and eternal. This lie that divorce tells about God's character veils and distorts his glory. And that is the reason that God hates divorce.

Is divorce ever justified? Sadly, yes. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that while our fallen nature wants to divorce "for any and every reason" (Matthew 19:3), "nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage."^[13] This criterion, the Confession goes on to say, is not to be determined by the individuals involved, but is to go through due process in both Church and state.

We live in a fallen, sinful, broken world and tragedies--including the tragedy of failed marriages--happen. We will never eliminate divorce even in the church. As Christians we must offer help, healing, and the grace of God to divorced Christians.

At the same time pastors can and must work diligently to reduce the number of divorces. This is only possible by insisting on careful and thorough preparation for marriage, by helping couples understand the theological significance of marriage as a witness to God's love for his people, and by reminding the Church that God hates divorce for a very good reason.

^[1] Janet Wilmoth and Gregor Koso, "Does marital history matter? Marital status and wealth outcomes among preretirement adults." *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 64, Number . February, 2002. Page(s) 254-268.

^[2] APSE Research Brief, "The Effects of Marriage on Health: A Synthesis of Recent Research Evidence U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, [Office of Human Services Policy](#), June 2007. (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/marriageonhealth/rb.htm>)

^[3] Jennifer Roback Morse, "Why Unilateral Divorce Has No Place in a Free Society" in Robert P. George and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds. *The Meaning of Marriage: Family, State, Market, and Morals*. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2006. Page 90.

^[4] Linda J. Waite, et. al. *Does Divorce Make People Happy?: Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*. Institute for American Values, 2002. Page 11.

^[5] Bridget Maher, *Deterring Divorce*. Family Research Council, 2004. Pages 6-7. (http://downloads.frc.org/31-AUG-07_EF04E17_1749893.pdf)

^[6] F. L.Furstenberg and J. O.Teitler, "Reconsidering the effects of marital disruption: What happens to children of divorce in early adulthood?" in *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 15, Number 2. , 1994. Page(s) 173-190.

^[7] Ibid.

^[8] Elizabeth Marquardt, "A 'Good' Divorce? No" in *The Chicago Tribune*, November 6, 2005. (http://betweentwoworlds.org/comments/?page_id=40).

^[9] Paul R. Amato "Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce" in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* August, 1996. Page(s) 628-640.

^[10] Ibid.

^[11] *The Book of Common Prayer: HTML Edition* (American, 1979), Version 1.0a, 1 May, 1998 (<http://vidicon.dandello.net/bocp/bocp4.htm#page435>).

^[12] Ibid.

^[13] Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIV.6 (http://www.pcanet.org/general/cof_chapxxi-xxv.htm#chapxxiv).