

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Leader's Guide

FAMILY LIFE

LESSON 6: SEPARATION, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Disciple Essentials module titled Family Life. This series of lessons looks at spiritual leadership in the home as it pertains to building a healthy Christian family. It begins with a framework for understanding the Biblical basis for family, and moves on to some challenges faced by families such as preparation for marriage, managing finances, leading one's children, and building good communication with your spouse. This series of lessons takes the view that spiritual leadership begins in the home – and both men and women have specific roles in this regard. These lessons present God's best design for families, while recognizing that in today's world families can come in many forms. The lessons will benefit those who are married, those who have the role of a parent, as well as young people who desire healthy relationships in the future.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God sincerely. The lessons will also benefit church leaders who teach the foundations for marriage and family, and how to develop strong relationships within them.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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FAMILY LIFE

LESSON 6: SEPARATION, DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

PURPOSE

The purpose of this lesson is to clearly understand what the Bible teaches about divorce, and to give guidance and help to those recovering from it.

LEADER'S NOTE

Divorce is a destructive force in society that has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Not every country or culture has experienced this rise in divorce, but it may come in future years. This is why Christians should understand the Biblical teachings about divorce. This lesson presents several interpretations of the Biblical references to divorce, because it is a contestable and divisive issue within the Church where there are varying viewpoints. As the lesson leader you may wish to present only one of these viewpoints, or discuss how different denominations and church groups interpret the Bible on this point. Spiritual leaders should decide what to teach others on this matter. Naturally, divorce leaves in its wake many strong emotions, including hurt and guilt. However, this lesson provides a framework for extending grace and hope to those who have experienced it. The Church must acknowledge the destructive forces of divorce, while still having sympathy and extending love for victims of it, as Jesus Himself did. In preparation for this lesson, do some internet research to find out the divorce rate in your country and around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ Do you know the divorce rate in your country? Where is the divorce rate highest in the world? Where is it lowest? Does this information surprise you?
- ❖ How has divorce affected people in your community?
- ❖ What do you think are legitimate reasons to get a divorce?
- ❖ What are some reasons that a married couple might live separately for a period of time (consider health, work, school, other obligations)? Do you think married couples should live separately? If so, under what conditions?



STUDY

Instruct the group on the following points.

TEACH:

- ❖ **What Is Marriage?** This lesson is a difficult one because it deals with the dissolution and termination of marriages. In order to understand separation, divorce, remarriage, and what God's Word says about these issues, we should review what a marriage is.
 - **A Gift Given by God:** God's gift of marriage was designed and instituted for man and woman to intimately relate to one another. Gifts are given with love, with a desire to give something good, and to fulfill some purpose. The purposes of marriage are:
 - **Primarily:** To glorify God and bear His image to the world, modeling the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Church: a relationship of love, self-sacrifice, care and faithfulness.
 - **Secondarily:** Marriage can provide us with companionship, children, enjoyment, acceptance and belonging, protection, and a means of helping us grow spiritually. Living with and loving another person can show us our own weaknesses and encourage us to seek God's help in becoming more like Christ.
 - Marriage is both for God's glory and our good. A gift given by God should not be discarded because we think we no longer need it.
 - **A Covenant Under God:** A marriage is created when a man and woman make a covenant with one another before God. This covenant is a promise that is solemn and binding.
 - A marriage covenant includes promises. The man promises to protect, to care and provide for, and to be faithful to the woman. The woman in turn vows to be faithful to him only. Marriage vows today often include statements that the parties will be faithful to one another for life, will honour, love and care for one another, and will forsake all others as they put the marriage partner first.
 - A Marriage covenant creates kinship (an everlasting family rather than mere blood relatives) based on promises taken in God's name. It is the strongest bond possible between two people.
 - Historically, in Old Testament times, a covenant between two people was confirmed with a sacrifice that consisted of splitting an animal into two pieces. Each of the covenant parties would walk between the pieces, in effect declaring that if the covenant was broken, they would likewise be split in two ([Jeremiah 34:18-19](#)). All covenants were understood to be life-long promises, and carried heavy consequences if broken.
 - When a marriage is broken, divorce occurs. What was one is now 'two'. A home, a family, and a precious gift of God are now torn apart.



- **A Union Designed by God:** When two people marry, they are said to become 'one flesh' which is closely bonded in a familial relationship. God designed two people to become as 'one'. This involves sharing of property, finances, work and lives (Mark 10:8).

 - **Man and Woman Come Together:** While they maintain their own identities and their own personalities and genders, a man and woman come together and become one through the marital act. Our bodies, minds and souls were designed to benefit from this union.
 - **One is Torn In Two:** When a marriage comes apart, it brings about much destruction. It does not affect only the two who were married, but everyone else who was connected by that union, including children, friends, family and church members.

- ❖ **God's Picture of Marriage and Divorce:** Marriage is made up of two sinful people who, if they are forgiven, regenerated and sanctified by God, can overcome their selfish and sinful desires. Sin is always at the heart of divorce. While it takes two people to make a strong marriage, it often takes only one to destroy it. This is demonstrated clearly in the Old Testament; God used the metaphors of marriage, unfaithfulness and divorce to illustrate His relationship with Israel.

 - **The Story of God and His People:**
 - Read Psalm 78. This Psalm describes Israel's relationship with God, and their repeated unfaithfulness. Israel is likened to a 'deceitful bow' which appears strong, but fails in the heat of battle. When faced with temptation, Israel refused to be faithful to God.
 - Read Ezekiel 16 Israel is compared to a prostitute, habitually and joyfully unfaithful. God demonstrated His anger and frustration with their unfaithfulness. Though they broke the covenant, in His mercy God promised restoration and an everlasting covenant.
 - Read Hosea 1: God used Hosea's marriage to show Israel what they had been like to Him. Hosea married an unfaithful wife, and yet Hosea was asked to remain with her and forgive her. God is saying He will provide a *new* covenant displaying His faithfulness.
 - **The Marriage:** God entered into a relationship with a human family through the line of Abraham. He ratified this covenant with Abraham's descendants – Isaac and Jacob. From Jacob, the nation of Israel was born, a nation God described as His wife (Isaiah 54:5).
 - **The Split:** God allowed Israel to be split into the north and south kingdoms because of their unfaithfulness (1 Kings 16:21, 1 Kings 11:9-13). When a covenant is broken, it creates a split. When a man and woman (who were one flesh) divorce, they become two again. This is painful and heartbreaking.
 - **The Unfaithfulness of Mankind:** God's people Israel were unfaithful to Him time and time again worshipping other gods. God referred to their idolatry as adultery (Jeremiah 3:20, Jeremiah 3:8-10).



- **The Faithfulness of God:** God divorced Israel as a nation (Jeremiah 3:8) in order to warn and bring back to Himself the remaining remnant, Judah. They had also been faithless toward God, but He chose to deal with them differently than Israel. God pleaded with Judah to return to Him, and promised He would remain faithful to them.
 - **What We Can Learn:** God was patient and continually forgave Israel. He teaches us to be patient with our partner when they don't meet our expectations, and offer forgiveness for sin. As God longed for His chosen people to return to Him, we should desire reconciliation whenever possible. Just as He hated the treachery that led to the broken covenant, we too ought to do all we can to protect our marriage from coming apart.
- ❖ **The Bible's Teaching on Separation:** Often the first step towards divorce is separation, when two people are unable or unwilling to live together any longer. Consider the Biblical advice on separation:
- **Separation:** Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 which gives us a mandate from God that a husband and wife should not separate. If they do, they should not divorce and marry someone else. Separation does not dissolve a marriage and should always leave room for reconciliation.
 - **If Separation Occurs:** If a couple is still happily married but chooses to be apart or to abstain from intimacy, God's Word instructs us that this should not be for a long time. Otherwise temptations can arise and bring difficulties into the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:5).
 - **Encourage Togetherness:** Various passages of the Bible indicate that a husband and wife are to remain together always, especially when the relationship is new. The Church should encourage couples to spend quality time together, stay together, and work through problems together (Deuteronomy 24:5, Proverbs 5:18, Hebrews 13:4).
 - Sometimes a brief separation is advisable for a couple who has difficulty communicating or when there has been sin in the marriage. This allows both parties to seek forgiveness from God, get necessary counselling, and be reconciled to one another with renewed devotion. This is difficult, but honours God.
- ❖ **Divorce in the Bible:** The ending of a marriage covenant by legal means is known as divorce. While marriage is an institution initiated by God, divorce is a human institution. There are different interpretations about divorce which we will examine in light of the Scriptures on this topic.
- **In the Old Testament:** Various laws given by Moses explained the circumstances under which divorce was possible. These laws were necessary at the time, because a man could dismiss his wife for any reason if she displeased him. When dismissed, she no longer had protection, property, or means of survival.



- o Because of God's tenderness towards the vulnerable and because of the people's insistence on divorce, stipulations were made so that a divorced woman would be able to remarry and live (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
- o Other passages show us God's heart about the faithlessness that causes divorce. God hates divorce and the state of abandonment it creates (Malachi 2:16).
- o God allowed His people to divorce only under specific circumstances (Ezra 9-10).
- o When a man divorced his wife, he was no longer responsible for her. He did not have to provide for her, nor was he accountable for her sin (Leviticus 22:13, Numbers 30:8-10).
- **In the Gospels:** The Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce also. Instead of directly answering their question, Jesus reminded them that when a man and woman marry, they become one flesh in God's sight. He then stated that 'any cause' is not justification for divorce; in fact, divorce was only a concession to protect the vulnerable. The only acceptable cause for divorce was sexual immorality (Matthew 19:1-12). Furthermore, Jesus said that marrying a divorced woman is adultery (Luke 16:18). It appears from His teachings that divorce was permissible only in the case of sexual immorality, thus breaking the covenant.
- **In the Writings of the Apostles:** The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, gave clear instructions about divorce and remarriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 we are taught the following:
 - o Once married, partners should not deprive one another of marital intimacy (vs.1-5).
 - o If unmarried, do not seek marriage (vs.6-7).
 - o Married couples should not separate (vs. 10).
 - o If we are married to an unbeliever and they consent to continue living with us, we should not seek a divorce. If the unbeliever abandons the marriage, separation is permissible (vs. 12-16).
 - o A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to be remarried (vs. 39).
- **Summary:** To summarize these Biblical passages:
 - o If a person abandons the marriage, they must present a certificate of divorce.
 - o Divorce is a last resort when reconciliation is impossible, and terms of the covenant are broken.
 - o Adultery (sexual immorality) breaks the marriage covenant.
 - o Abandonment (where an unbelieving spouse will not live with a believer) is also grounds for divorce.
 - o A divorced person is free to remarry if their former spouse dies or remarries.
- ❖ **Three Views on Divorce and Remarriage:** From the Biblical passages many people have attempted to construct rules about when and if divorce is possible for a Christian, and if so, whether remarriage is allowed. Because this is a complex issue, we are presenting three of many possible views on divorce and remarriage. Individuals should carefully search the Scriptures to



seek God's will, and not change God's words to support their own view. Where there is divorce, there is sin that must be repented of. We must be careful not to take sin lightly. On the other hand, we must not deny that God can forgive and that His grace is available to us.

- There is a range of approaches different churches and teachers have used to apply these teachings. Consider three possible positions we could take:

	Position 1	Position 2	Position 3
When Divorce is Allowed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When terms of the covenant are broken by one person and reconciliation is not possible. • When an unbeliever is no longer willing to live with a believer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When infidelity has occurred and reconciliation has been attempted but is not possible. • Unbelieving spouse unwilling to stay in the marriage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When infidelity has occurred and reconciliation has been attempted but is not possible.
Reasons for Divorce:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covenant terms broken by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infidelity - Sexual Immorality - Abuse - Abandonment - Refusal to care for and love • Unbelieving spouse initiates divorce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covenant terms broken by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infidelity - Sexual Immorality • Unbelieving spouse initiates divorce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covenant terms broken by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unrepentant Infidelity • Unbelieving spouse initiates divorce
Remarriage:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permissible for both parties once previous marriage is officially dissolved by divorce. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The innocent party can remarry without committing adultery once the marriage is dissolved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutes adultery for both parties. Divorce merely permits separation – each must remain unmarried until their spouse dies or reconciliation takes place, even if divorce occurred before coming to Christ.

ASK:

Discuss these questions with your participants:

Which position most clearly reflects your understanding of the Biblical teaching?

What are the outcomes of this belief within the Church?

For what reason did God allow divorce? What was He protecting? Why did He concede? Does the view you choose reflect those protections and concessions?



TEACH

- ❖ **Application for Your Life:** It might be difficult to choose a clear policy because each individual situation is different, and we are often confused with anger, hurt and broken trust when experiencing divorce in our lives or in the lives of those we love. Each of us should heed the following advice:
 - **If you are Unmarried:** Consider carefully the serious decision to make a covenant with another person who could hurt and betray you. Be wary of marrying someone previously married. Encourage those who are married to remain so.
 - **If you are Married to an Unbeliever:** If you have come to faith after marriage, entered marriage not of your own choice, or are married to an unbeliever for whatever reason, stay with your spouse and pray for them. As long as they are willing to stay with you, be reconciled to them and love them.
 - **If you are considering divorce:** Do not take this action lightly. Be reconciled if at all possible by confessing sin and/or forgiving your spouse. Even after adultery has taken place, reconciliation is possible with help from other believers and good counsel. This is a beautiful picture of God's forgiveness of us, and is a way to bear God's image as a couple.
 - **If you have been divorced:** Be reconciled to your former spouse if they are unmarried and forgiveness has been extended and accepted. This is being obedient to God, bearing His image well. If there were Biblical grounds for divorce and your conscience and spiritual leaders allow it, you may remarry.
 - **If reconciliation is not possible:** Confess your sins to God, and remember that there is grace and mercy in God our Father. He forgives our sins and gives us a chance to start over.
 - **If you are remarried:** Remain in the situation you are in. If you believe your divorce was not based on Biblical principles, confess your sin and consider it forgiven. Work on your current marriage, and do not divorce in order to return to a previous spouse. Be the best spouse you can be.
 - **For all of us:** Do not encourage divorce or take it lightly. Help others in their marriages, and hold marriage in high esteem. Consider how you can honour God in whatever state you are in. We should extend grace to those who have undergone divorce. Past sins should not affect how we treat people today – if they are in Christ, their sins are forgiven by God. The Church can help extend the love of God to those who feel betrayed and unloved, and extend forgiveness to those who have sinned in their marriage.



DISCUSSION

- ❖ How does this lesson contrast society's views on divorce? Have your ideas about divorce changed?
- ❖ What would you say to a friend who was considering a divorce because of an unfaithful spouse? What options do they have? What practical help could you give them?
- ❖ Do you know anyone who has undergone a divorce? How could the Church come alongside them in order to help them during an emotional and difficult time?
- ❖ How should God's teaching on divorce impact how we behave in our marriages day to day?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that all participants would have a clear conviction of God's ideals for marriage, and that they would champion holy marriage in their communities, workplaces and churches. Pray that those who have experienced divorce would find healing in Jesus Christ, and that grace and forgiveness would be evident. Pray for hurting marriages, that both husband and wife would seek after God and demonstrate love and forgiveness. Pray that God would be glorified through all marriages in your church.