

Are the Crosses Sin Puts on Marriage Reasons for Divorce?

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Did you ever wonder why a husband or wife comes to you about his or her spouse? I may sound a little like Andy Rooney, but did you ever wonder that? The first question you have to think about asking is to paraphrase a popular Wendy's commercial, "What's the beef?"

It doesn't take much experience or lengthy conversation to recognize motives. Either a disgruntled spouse has come to bend our ear and have us agree the best thing is to get rid of the offending party, or a deeply concerned spouse has come to pay attention to and heed God's advice which we help them find in His word. The more I hear about the manner with which many husbands and wives treat one another the more I begin to wonder to myself, "Did they really prepare themselves for this life long union? Were they paying attention at all while they recited the wedding vows? There have been times when I have had to overcome a strong temptation of a different sort. When a wife who is guided by God's Word and motivated by Christ's love for her is honestly doing all she can to make her marriage a blessing and the husband does all he can to oppose her, isn't it tempting to say to the wife, "You are really right. This guy is a total loss. The best thing for you to do is get a divorce and start over."

But to say that would be to fail Christ, to fail her, to fail the couple and to fail self. No one is to tear apart the union God created in Eden and into which men and women, especially Christian men and women in our context, enter. It is our duty and privilege as Christ's servants to do everything we can to keep marriages together even if many times that is in spite of the two persons involved.

Who would dare deny that by reason of sin many crosses have been laid upon this holy estate of marriage? In one wedding service we say,

And although, by reason of sin, many a cross hath been laid upon this estate, nevertheless our gracious Father in heaven doth not forsake His children in an estate so holy and acceptable to Him, but is ever present with his bountiful blessings (*The Lutheran Agenda*, page 36).

The idea for this paper was mine, so I guess it only fair that I write it. Originally this title was to be *What is the "For Worse" of Marriage?* Since we do not use those words in our forms and it sounded so negative, I changed the title so we would have a negative answer but a positive conclusion. So we ask instead, *Are the crosses sin puts on marriage reasons for divorce?* There are four divisions:

- I. Crosses God puts on marriage
- II. Crosses sin puts on marriage
- III. Adultery and desertion particularly
- IV. A positive conclusion

Crosses God puts on marriage

God ordained marriage. Therefore marriage is perfect. One man and one woman promise to be husband and wife "till death us do part." This husband and wife are sinners and therefore sin infects their new relationship no less than it infects any other, parent and children for example Yet our merciful God does not punish us for our sins in marriage. This should serve as a constant reminder to married people that certain sufferings and hardships the marriage will be required to endure are nothing less than God's gifts for the nurturing and maturing of the relationship. As such these crosses will not be reasons for divorce but work for the ultimate good of the intact union.

It may seem to go without saying that the crosses God puts on marriage are not reasons for divorce. We may, no, we will encounter them who feel otherwise. Although each honestly promised “to keep with her(him) in sickness and in health,” an unexpected or lengthy illness or handicap can put emotional strains and financial drains on the relationship which seemingly cannot be overcome. Divorce is sometimes the result.

We can only pray that many will be like some faithful couples we know who by the Spirit’s power overcame and passed these tests and now have stronger marriages than ever before. I know a husband and wife in my hometown, Toledo, whose son broke his neck ten years ago and remains a quadriplegic. He is 24, lives at home and is nearly helpless. This couple’s family life has been difficult but they say they are stronger today than ever before. They remain unwilling to use their son’s condition as an excuse for not dealing with the test God has asked them to face together, as one in Christ as God expects them to do.

Medical and financial burdens God places in marriage are not reasons for divorce. God oversees these tests for the strengthening of the marriage involved. Two passages will suffice to sum up part one before we continue to the next.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me (2 Co. 12:9,10).”

“If anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim 5:8).”

The crosses God puts on marriage are not reasons for divorce. But what about the crosses sin puts on marriage?

Crosses sin puts on marriage

God does not punish us for our sins. We often cause abuse for ourselves by letting sin get the best of us. The crosses sin puts on marriage do not appear out of some transparent mist which blows over husband and wife like some unstoppable cloud. Marital problems don’t just happen. They are caused. Sinners cause them. Sinners have to take some responsibility for these crosses. Sometimes that responsibility lies with one party. Usually, both husband and wife must be brought to confess the guilt for a marriage gone sour.

What are some of the specific crosses sin puts on a marriage? Physical abuse, alcoholism and other drug abuse, financial waste, gross neglect of other responsibilities within the roles God gives husbands and wives when He says,

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:22,23,25).”

all come to mind.

None of the above is in keeping with the mutual promise made to God on the wedding day, to live after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony, to love, comfort, honor, keep and forsake all others. Is a husband or wife who abuses the other physically or emotionally or who doesn’t live in any way according to God’s way keeping the promise he or she made to the other, “I take you in the presence of God and these witnesses to be my wedded husband(wife) and pledge you my faithfulness till death us do part (*The Lutheran Agenda*, page 38)?”

What about the other crosses sin puts on marriage? One spouse does not talk to the other, literally for several weeks. The husband watches television and doesn’t play with the children or participate in their development. The wife is too busy with outside activities to contribute to the love and stability a Christian home needs to have.

Most of the crosses sin puts in marriage are not the bold and visibly ugly ones, such as abuse and alcoholism. They are the petty ones: jealousy, envy, laziness, haughtiness, pride, childishness, immaturity, pettiness, spite, vengefulness, the quick rapier tongue and the slow to respond begrudging heart.

Are any of these crosses sin puts in marriage reasons for divorce? Paul tells us:

“A wife must not separate from her husband...And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her husband (1 Co. 7:10, 13, 14).”

They are reasons for self-examination. The crosses mentioned above are reasons for confession and for prayer and recommitment. They are reasons for faith and forgiveness, patience and love. They are reasons for getting some kind of help. They are not reasons for divorce. The vow, the promise, the commitment two people make before the Lord to live together as long as they both shall live eliminates divorce as an option.

It is important we pastors remember that. We must forgive our enemies and our people's enemies. One of their enemies at this particular time may be their spouse. It is up to us to love them both even as the charges are being filed with us against one of them by the other. Maybe the charges are true. Maybe the husband or wife is the biggest whatever to come along. Maybe we feel empathy or sympathy with the crying, emotional wreck before us in the study. However, we must not give the slightest validation or assent to any idea to take that union and “asunder” it.

There will have to be some changes made in a marriage where the crosses are piling up and the relationship is bending, bending ever toward the breaking point. Were we to give assent to the desire for divorce we would be invalidating God's word and our place as God's ambassadors. The changes have to be in the heart within the confines of the marital union. Counseling, even absenting one's self for a time out of a rational and real fear for personal safety are options which must be carried out by a sincere desire to make good the commitment symbolized by the exchanging of rings:

“Receive this ring as a pledge and token of wedded love and faithfulness.”

“May the giving and receiving of these rings ever be a symbol of the faithful and unselfish community of goods (how about that today?) that you as husband and wife, in weal and in woe, will cultivate without ceasing and be a reminder of the excellent Christian virtues with which you are to adorn your marriage (*The Lutheran Agenda*, pages 38,39. Parenthesis mine.)”

We are all well aware of the challenges which pass through our! studies in the way of marital cross bearing. In these opportunities for Christian love and advice we know we have to be careful not to take sides. We can't get too emotionally involved to deal with the realities.. We consider the source of what's being said and what accusations are being made. Every person needs help in just a little different way. But one thing they all need to remember is they promised God to live as one. “Now live as one and sit down together and figure out how to get this mess straightened out. Maybe it will take only once. Maybe it will be an ongoing thing. but in your oneness do something now.” This brings us to the particular crosses of adultery and desertion.

Adultery and desertion in particular

Here are two valid reasons for divorce. Or are the? God says:

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery (Matt 19:9).”

Marital unfaithfulness here is *porneia*; unchastity, sexual intercourse of an illicit nature. It means adultery. But the act itself may not be the actual breaking of the marriage. It may only be the result of the marriage having already been dissolved in the heart of one spouse.

Up until the point of the sexual intercourse it may be difficult to tell where the marriage stands. Isn't that true even after? But before the adultery the offended person has no right to seek a divorce. But after, the offended party now has a reason to get a divorce. Or does he/she? There can be a feeling almost of relief on the part of the person sinned against: "At last I caught the so and so and now I have my ticket out of this so called marriage." Pastors have to be aware of this attitude not only in them, but also in ourselves. At last, we might think to ourselves, now we can say go ahead with a clear conscience and allow a divorce. No more bother with them.

A retired and wise pastor once overheard me say, "Adultery is a reason for divorce." He corrected me that adultery brings the option of divorce. There is never a good reason for divorce. A good reason can too often be an excuse not to forgive and forget.. It can be a too convenient avenue of escape when reconciliation is still possible with some effort and understanding.

The same holds true with desertion. I don't believe desertion has to be labeled malicious. Is there such a thing as kind desertion? The word in 1 Corinthians 7:15 "leaves" indicates a separation, to separate one's self from another, a divorce. Desertion does not, I believe, have to be a physical going away with all belongings and not leaving a forward address. It can also be the separation of the heart from the commitments made before God and then requesting a divorce. In such cases a Christian is not bound to continue in that marriage. But it should not be an excuse to get out from under a bad situation. The person who is thinking in his heart, "Good, the person is divorcing me now I'm rid of him," is no less guilty that the one who openly says, "I want a divorce."

Are adultery and desertion in particular reasons for divorce? Certainly they are crosses sin places on marriage. But are crosses sin put on marriage reasons for divorce? The negative answer is NO. They are reasons for a positive conclusion.

A positive conclusion

Divorce is in every sense a negative conclusion to marriage because in God's view it is no conclusion at all. Instead a positive conclusion of a marriage saved and hearts still united as one is the goal. We can help people reach it. Two passages in particular can help"

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32)."

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8)."

The crosses sins puts on marriage are not reasons for divorce. They are reasons for kindness, compassion and forgiveness. They are opportunities to show deep love and concern for one another. It takes Spirit-worked self-control through the Word of Christ and His everlasting patience with us to bring us to say no to sin and yes to the guidelines He gives us for a happy and truly successful marriage. When we as pastors have these qualities in our own unions with our wives then and only then will we be able to be the kind of help people need to bear the crosses God sends and tear down the crosses Satan erects. By holding the Perfect Marriage of Jesus to the Church before our eyes and our people's eyes will we have a correct model and worthwhile goal for our counseling.

God instituted marriage as a blessing. Don't we want our marriages to be a blessing? Isn't it our calling to help others have marriages that are a blessing to them and to their children?

Jesus' marriage to His Church is perfect.. He is the Lord God and we are His Bride washed clean from our sins by His blood through Holy Baptism. Don't we want our marriages and the marriages God calls upon us

to watch over to also be perfect? Marriage was made in heaven. There is no reason it should become a living hell.