

THROWING IN THE TOWEL

It's getting harder by the day distinguishing Christians for non-Christians. This is particularly true in the area of divorce. Statistically, our failure rate for marriage is not significantly different from those outside of the faith.

As a Christian counselor, nothing disturbs me more than to see a couple deliberately throw in the towel with little or no attempt to do the hard work of reconciling their relationship. In this age of rampant "Me-ism" it is far easier to just walk away and rationalize or blame the other person. God Himself is often used to provide the escape hatch ("God doesn't want me to be miserable and unhappy, does He?") when the going gets tough.

What Christians often don't know are immediate and long-term consequences that come with bailing-out on their marital commitment. The lure of a quick fix often blinds them to the harsh realities that are inherent in divorce. *As Christians, we need to be continually and solemnly warned that taking the world's way out brings with it much pain and heartache.* As a people, we need to be delivered from the deductive notion that divorce is the only solution to an unhappy marriage. Secular research affirms this. Of adults surveyed five years after divorce, only about one-fourth are managing to cope adequately with their new lives. Half are muddling along, and the final quarter are either failing to recover or looking back with intense longing, wishing the divorce had never occurred.

Children, contrary to the popular resiliency myth, experience the damaging effects of divorce. The typical "wisdom" of comforters who tell us that divorce is not catastrophic because children are resilient is not only false but misleading in that it causes parents to overlook or to minimize their children's pain. The trauma of divorce is second only to death. Children sense a deep loss and feel very vulnerable to forces beyond their control. There are, no doubt, many factors that contribute to the damaging effect divorce has on children. The following are just a few:

- It signals the collapse of the family structure-the child feels alone and frightened. This loneliness can be acute and long remembered.
- A couple's capacity to be parents is diminished. They are preoccupied with their own emotional survival during the critical months of the divorce.
- Divorce creates conflicts of loyalty in the children. Whose side do they take? They feel pulled by love and loyalty in both directions.
- Uncertainty about the future can cause deep-seated insecurity in children. Being dependent mainly on one parent can create a great deal of anxiety.
- Anger and resentment between parents, which is prevalent in most divorces, creates intense fear in the child. The younger he or she is, the more damaging the climate of anger can be.
- Children take upon themselves anxiety concerning their parents. They worry intensely about their mother in particular, with their father's departure being a terrifying event.
- If the family moves, a child may lose an "at home" parent, a home, a school, a church, and friends. Divorce represents the loss of so many things the psychological damage is almost inevitable.

A common question raised by even Christians contemplating divorce is, "But can't divorce sometimes be a relief for the child?" Apparently children don't think so. Less than ten- percent report being relieved by their parent's divorce. And those who do feel relieved still struggle with adjusting to it.

People opt for divorce for a variety of reasons. Some of the most frequent reasons given for breakups include Incompatibility, boredom, attraction to someone else, poor communication, irrational ideas about pursuits in life, mid-life crisis, and personal neuroses. It is not due, as might be expected, to continuous conflict and physical abuse. Most Christian counselors clearly know that most marriages could be saved and turned into satisfying relationships if both partners would admit their own selfishness and commit themselves to the hard work of making the needed changes.

Unfortunately, we Christians have allowed our culture to reduce us into believing romanticized notions about marriage. We view marriage in terms of our own "needs," many of which are fantasized and irrational. When those "needs" are not met, our culture tells us we have a right to end the marriage.

Divorce is not the only answer to an unhappy marriage. In most cases, it creates more problems than it solves—for the parents as well as the children. Those contemplating divorce should seriously consider the following before taking any further steps to end their marriage:

- 1) Face the Scriptural commands *against* divorce. Read Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10: 2-12; Luke 18:18; Romans 7:1-3; and 1 Corinthians 7: 10-17.
- 2) Seek another perspective on what is wrong with your marriage.
- 3) Be honest and willing to confront your own contribution to your marriage problems.
- 4) Challenge the simplistic idea that a "divorce will solve my problems."
- 5) Accept the fact that relationships go through seasons.
- 6) Pray for patience, determination, wisdom and courage.
- 7) Take the initiative, with the courage that God gives, to seek a solution to your marital problems. God has a way out of even the worst marital mess if we will turn to Him in humble dependence.

If you are about to throw in the marital towel, think again. His grace is sufficient—He is ready and willing to work with you in restoring your marital relationship.