

Dealing With the Ex

His wife said to him, "Do you still retain your integrity? Curse God and die!" - Job 2:9 HCSB



In a society overwhelmed by divorce, the issue of how we should interact with an ex-spouse is one that simply cannot be ignored. As a pastor, I have to help people with the consequences of divorce on a weekly basis: arguments over splitting up the “stuff” every marriage seems to accumulate, child custody, visitation, discipline and schooling; arguments over the selling price of the house...the list is nearly as inexhaustible as the ire.

How does a Christian deal with an ex? How can we negotiate the lives of our children with an abusive spouse? How can we do our part to establish justice when the legal system seems to be about everything but justice?

Above any human, even a pastor, we need to listen to God’s wisdom. If we don’t, we will suffer the consequences. Worse, our families will suffer the consequences.¹ We can always count on the Word to be correct. It is not plagued with the improper motivations and blind spots to which humans are so

susceptible. It is clear and plain. If there is a problem, the problem lies not with the Word but with our willingness to obey it.²

We also need to establish in our heart the importance of protecting our children. Whether married or divorced, the call to protect our children remains paramount.³ Parents are responsible to care for their children. That responsibility goes far beyond monetary support. We must provide them with safety – physical, moral and spiritual safety.⁴ Our decisions must not hinder our children from coming to the Lord. We shouldn’t expose them to more sin than we can help. They mustn’t be deliberately put in a place where they will suffer harm. Instead, we should try to always give them the most opportunities they can have to know Christ and follow Him.⁵

When we are looking for advice, we shouldn’t go to the worldly - to those who are unsuccessful in life. It would be foolish to only go to those who will tell us what we want to hear. Instead, we should find the godly; men and women of character; people who are strong and have a servant’s heart. They will guide us well. If we listen to fools, our destruction is assured.⁶ Do you take financial advice from a bum lying in his own puke in the street? So why take marriage advice from a person who has had four husbands? When a fool brays instructions and advice, your best bet is to simply let it go in one ear and out the other. Then turn to the job and do what is right.

One of the worst elements of a divorce is the apparent need each spouse has to “win.” Each will try to deceive the other. Each will try to not give important information so that the other spouse will look bad. This urge, part of our yetzer hara, must be overcome. Even a believer will struggle with it. At least they struggle. An unbeliever will often simply lie and cheat, seemingly completely unhindered by their conscience.



¹ Proverbs 1:25-28; 23:12

² Proverbs 7:7-9; Deuteronomy 30:11-14

³ Luke 17:1-2

⁴ 1 Timothy 5:8

⁵ Mark 10:13-16

⁶ Proverbs 10:21

Once we have caught a person in lies, we need to start giving what they say less and less weight. Their statements as to our motivations or our character should mean less and less to us. Lying is a fundamental character flaw that affects everything else. It darkens the liar's mind.⁷ A person who has consistently suppressed the truth in their lives and lived contrary to the Scriptures and even common sense, has darkened their own minds. Their wisest thoughts are nonsense. We need to think carefully before listening to such a person.

As we are being helped by friends, family and (hopefully) our church's elders, we must be willing to listen to constructive criticism but be wise in distinguishing what is lashing out and what is actually constructive.⁸ Not everyone is clear in their loyalties. Not everyone is necessarily "on our side."

In the end, we will know who gave us wise advice. The godly person who points us in the direction of God's will shall be recognized in the long run. Those fools who keep hurting people with their foolishness will find themselves alone and without respect. If we recognize a fool, then we would be wise to cut them off quickly. It is harmful to allow them to deceive us with their vain human philosophies. We should do this before it's too late.

Sometimes we naturally struggle with issues of self-worth. Having our marriage fall apart doesn't help this. If one spouse is particularly intelligent, they may choose to use our feelings of inadequacy against us. We need to make sure that we don't get bamboozled by a smooth talker who is primarily using emotional arguments. Getting the advice of several wise people who have demonstrated their success in following the scriptures and lead healthy lifestyles will protect us from error.⁹

We should also take the person's motivations into account. Why they are saying things is just as important as what they are saying because it relates to how they will implement the plan. They could say one thing and do another if their heart is wrong.¹⁰

We must not let ourselves be persuaded to follow a plan that we know in our hearts is wrong.¹¹ We must be very wary of allowing an unrighteous person to lead us into any activity. Treachery and ulterior motives is a hallmark of sin.¹²



Conversing with a fool within the terms of his folly is to lower oneself to his level and to accept his outlook upon life as one worthy of consideration. We should answer a fool, patiently and quietly answering his questions and arguments, so that the foolishness of the proposition is revealed¹³. However, we cannot allow ourselves to get dragged into their methods.¹⁴ We are stewards of God's time and resources. We should not foolishly allow them to waste too much of either.¹⁵

We also need to take into account that the ungodly heart cannot truly be satisfied. There is no end to a human heart's deceit or desire. At some point, we simply need to quit and do what is right whether it's appreciated or not.¹⁶ We need to commit ourselves to following the Scriptures that are not just useful for direction in life but can actually give us insight into the motivations and intents of the human heart!¹⁷

⁷ Proverbs 10:31; Romans 1:18-22

⁸ Proverbs 15:31; 25:12

⁹ Proverbs 11:14

¹⁰ Proverbs 26:24-26

¹¹ Ephesians 5:6-12

¹² Proverbs 12:5; 26:5

¹³ Proverbs 26:4

¹⁴ Proverbs 26:5

¹⁵ Ephesians 5:15-17

¹⁶ Proverbs 27:20; Jeremiah 17:9-10

¹⁷ 2 Timothy 3:12-16; Hebrews 4:12

A godly person will not allow themselves to be goaded into losing control of their tongues.¹⁸ The hallmark of a tzaddik is self-control.¹⁹ Anger and frustration is allowed, but it cannot be allowed to drive us to sin.²⁰ In our frustration, we must not yield to the temptation to speak half truths or whole lies in order to get out of some conflict or in order to cause them to yield to our way. Whatever happens, we must not seek vengeance for wrongs suffered. We must not cross the line.²¹

Thankfully, we are not required to make peace at all costs. Paul instructs, "If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone."²² "Pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another."²³ We should work toward peace, and do what is required to nurture it.²⁴ But it takes two to tango and if the other person will not cooperate with right living then we should be ready to endure the conflict.

A wise person will marshal their thoughts before approaching the ungodly. We should write them down in right order so that the wisdom of their proposal can be clearly and easily demonstrated. It also allows them to keep on track in spite of all the varying ideas. It would also be a good idea to make the ideas as attractive as possible, building in little gifts of time, services or other concessions.²⁵

However, while we should be willing to yield or concede on many matters, we must keep in mind that true love is demonstrated by doing what is right. True love does not yield to sin.²⁶ We should not let our exhaustion get the better of us but instead should faithfully keep to the right path.²⁷ If we yield to ungodly advice simply out of sheer exhaustion or a desire to escape conflict, we will reap the consequences of following ungodly advice.

¹⁸ Proverbs 15:1; 17:27

¹⁹ Proverbs 16:32; 25:28

²⁰ Ephesians 4:25-27

²¹ Romans 12:14, 17, 19; Proverbs 24:28-29

²² Romans 12:18

²³ Romans 14:19

²⁴ Matthew 5:9

²⁵ Proverbs 15:2; 17:8; 18:16; 21:14

²⁶ Romans 12:9

²⁷ Proverbs 24:10; Galatians 6:7-10