



# THE PASTOR'S VOICE

Insights from Church Leaders

## **The Pastor's Voice Podcast: Episode 11**

### **Transcript: The Church and the Life Saving Divorce**

**Reuel Sample:** I am honored to have you here. Gretchen, this book seems to go against church teaching completely. So tell us about your ministry. Tell us about your book and the reasons why you decided to be courageous and write such a book.

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Oh, well, thank you for asking. Yeah, it did take some courage. I waited until I was. I was retired to write this book because I've worked in Christian organizations all my life. But the other thing I've done all my life, or at least for the last 20 to almost 25 years now, is I've been a Christian divorce recovery leader in conservative churches in the Los Angeles area since 1998. So I have learned a lot. And one of the things I've had to face as a young divorce recovery leader right after my divorce, a couple of years after my divorce, was that to really understand that there is a big difference between frivolous divorces and life saving divorces and our churches tend and I don't, you know, I know they're well-meaning. I know the pastors out there are well-meaning, but our churches tend to make it sound like ninety five percent of divorces are frivolous and only a handful are really, really life saving. But the truth of the matter is when you look at the research studies on reasons people gave for their divorces, about half, maybe even more than half were for what I call the life saving reasons. And those are the very serious reasons. And we know as Christians that God is against sexual immorality, physical violence, chronic emotional abuse. I mean, God wants God specifically told us that our marriages are to be loving, to be caring, to be nurturing, right? So we know that these kinds of abusive conditions or where there's really serious life destroying addictions or that lead to indifference and neglect. We

know those can't possibly be on the heart of God as being a good Christian marriage. I mean that God is not mocked, right? So I learned that about half of divorces in the United States are for these very, very serious things.

**Reuel Sample:** So that's a that's a big claim. And I'm just going to interrupt you for a second. We hear that 50 percent of all marriages in the in the United States end in divorce, and there's no difference in that statistic inside or outside the church, which which is a problem itself. But you're saying that 50 percent at least are caused by an unhealthiness in one or both of the spouses?

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Yeah, something that's severe, something that is a pattern. Yeah. You know, I'm not talking about. You know, the you know, we're all sinners, right? We all do dumb things or insensitive things or uncaring things. I'm talking about patterns, a pattern of sexual immorality, a pattern of physical violence used to dominate and intimidate the other person. A pattern of using fear and obligation and guilt to and using God's name to force one spouse to obey the other spouse and cover up for their marriage endangering sin. So, yeah, we know we never talk about that. And those studies are out there. The number one reason for divorce in America is is sexual immorality is adultery, and a close on its heels are a physical, emotional and sexual abuse. And then also the life what I call family crushing addictions. You know, this is where someone takes the rent and the grocery money and they squander it, whether it be on gambling or on spending or on prostitutes or just, you know, anything. So there are people who are willing to throw the entire family under the bus for their own selfish desires and wants. And we just don't talk about that in our churches.

**Reuel Sample:** In your research and in your working with people in the churches, is there a noticeable statistical no statistical difference between those in the churches and those outside of the churches who are wrestling with these issues?

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Oh, I wish I could tell you yes. A really interesting study just came out within the last two years from the pro-marriage, highly conservative think tank called the Institute for Family Studies. And what they discovered is that in the United States, one in four couples have what they call interpersonal violence, and that goes for both highly religious couples and completely secular couples. It's unique to the United States in other countries that were surveyed. They actually found that religion did make

a huge difference about whether or not there would be interpersonal violence. But sadly, here in the United States, even highly religious couples one in four do have interpersonal violence. And Barna Group has also said that even in the most conservative churches, about one in four Christians are divorced. And, you know, good conservative Christians aren't quitters, and we don't. We're not looking for the grass is greener or the easy way out. We're not the kind of people who would get an I'm bored divorce or I feel unfulfilled divorce. Or, you know, I just missed the party life divorce. That's not us. We were in it for the long haul. I don't know about you, but I was brought up in an excellent Christian home where my parents have been happily married for 60 years and counting. I mean, I had a wonderful home. My parents are genuine believers. And yet, you know, there are just enough destructive people out there who you know and sometimes even devout Christians marry them. And even though, you know, we aren't the abusers, we aren't the child molesters, we aren't the, you know, the cheaters. We end up with someone like this. And of course, they want us to believe that, you know, we're the problem to excuse themselves, but we're not. And and that's just the sad reality. It's just a numbers game. You know, there are just a certain number of very charming but very destructive people out there, and sometimes we Christians marry them.

**Reuel Sample:** The last to last two years now, almost the last two years, we've talked about COVID 19 and what has been called the pan divorce. Have these have these statistics about interpersonal violence gone up? Are there studies that show that or otherwise?

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Well, definitely. You know, the homicides have gone up. I thought you were going to ask me if divorce rate has gone up, but with the courts closed so much in 2020. Divorce rate obviously could not, you know, skyrocketed as people thought it would because you simply couldn't go to court. You couldn't get a judge to rule on your case. But yeah, we absolutely know that homicides have gone through the roof. Now, when you're trapped with your abuser and you can't run, you can't get on that plane, you have no place to go. Your friends, you know, maybe don't want an outsider in their home due to the COVID thing, whatever it. We suspect that there's a lot more domestic violence going on, certainly violence toward children because children would normally say something to their teacher or to the school counselor. And that's how a lot of that domestic violence gets reported. And with the kids not in school, that means a lot

is is happening behind closed doors and never getting reported. So experts in this area, I'm not one, I'm not an expert, are extremely concerned that child abuse is skyrocketing and it's not being reported.

**Reuel Sample:** So let's go back to my question why aren't churches getting involved in this? Why are they turning a blind eye to a woman or a man who says this? This person that I'm married to in the public is a saint, but he is. He is bound to some unhealthy or ungodly actions at home. He's abusing me. He's abusing other people. Why aren't churches helping these people out?

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Right, that is such a good question. You know why? Why don't they believe me when I say this person looks so good on the outside, but behind closed doors, they're brutal. I think the answer to that is really well-meaning. I think our ideology is that God can fix any marriage that God plus you plus me, God. Any marriage can be can be fixed and that our prayer, our fasting, our righteous, godly example will inspire that person who maybe is having some trouble to become a good person and to want to become a good person. And so we are very optimistic people. We are filled with hope. We are filled with faith. We are confident that God can change even the most hardened sinner. The problem is that hardened sinner has got to want to change, and that's what we're missing. And I think the second part, the second answer to your question is that we have made divorce a culture war issue. We want to be seen as being better than worldly culture. And so we want to say that our marriages are better, our marriages are healthier, our marriages are happier and more sexually fulfilling. And so what we do is we instead of looking at the reasons they're not, we put peer pressure on people who start wondering, Should I divorce we? We don't ask questions. We start preaching sermons like the one I heard at my church. If you walk away from your marriage, you're walking away from Jesus.

**Reuel Sample:** Oh, and no, no, he did not say that.

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Yes, he did say that. And he said it five times in one sermon. And I had I was leading Divorce Recovery Group in the church, and a lot of the people in my group are domestic violence victims, physical violence and emotional coercion. And a woman called me that afternoon, Sunday afternoon after the after the church, and she said If I hadn't been in your divorce recovery groups, I would be on the floor in fetal

position, curled up, sucking my thumb because that pastor just told me I'm losing my salvation by wanting a divorce to get away from my horrible husband and I knew her husband. I had known them socially. I had been in their presence many, many times over the prior three years, and I already knew he was a troubled man who couldn't seem to live by social norms. He was just always he was one of these people who felt that rules were meant to be broken. He was vicious to her. He was. He never hit her. He was smart enough never to hit her. But I mean, he might as well have because his emotional behavior to her, his his viciousness, his contempt for her were just as bad. So our churches, when we take a strong culture war view of divorce, as always, being wrong and always being against what God wants, oh man, we are causing so much hurt and pain in our churches.

**Reuel Sample:** So what do pastors? Need to do.

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Oh, wow, OK. First of all, is to get that nuanced view that there are 50 percent of divorces are genuinely life saving. Second, I think we need a more nuanced view of. And we need to read all the Bible passages about divorce, not just our cherry picked ones. Ok, so we need to not only be aware that, you know, Jesus condone divorce for sexual immorality and Paul condone divorce for abandonment by an unbeliever. But we also need to look at the Old Testament verses. I mean, if we accept Malachi 2:16, which is an Old Testament verse saying, you know, and we accept that view that God hates divorce and we'll talk about that in a bit, then we also have to accept other things. In the law of Moses, for example, the command for a man to divorce his wife if he refuses to provide for her at the minimum standard of care. That's in Exodus 20, one 10 through 11 men. If if they took on a second or third wife, they couldn't take their first wife and say, You know, I don't really like her all that much. I'm no longer going to provide the minimum required amount of care for her. And in Jewish Times, in ancient Judaism, those rabbis actually, and this isn't biblical. This is this is from the ancient Jewish literature. They actually spelled out when they talked about Exodus Twenty one ten through eleven exactly how much food and clothing and and love you were to give to your wife. And if you weren't willing to do that, she was free to go. She could petition the court and be let free.

**Reuel Sample:** Another thing that goes against everything that we often hear is that we often see the Old Testament as just being only the guy can divorce. But what you're

saying is no. If if these conditions were met, the woman could go and petition for divorce.

**Gretchen Baskerville:** Right. There are laws weren't at all like our laws today, so we really have to kind of erase what we know about divorce law in America or in the western world. And back then, a man didn't need to go through any kind of court process at all to send away his wife. He would give her a certificate of divorce, send her out the door. There were some financial things that he had to do because there was bride price and then if her father gave her a dowry, those had to be returned to her if the divorce was not justified. I'm sorry they had to be returned to her if he was divorcing her, and he did, and she hadn't committed adultery, for example. But women at that time. Could petition they could not enact a divorce, they couldn't do the instant divorce that the men could do, but they could petition the court for a divorce. They could go to the court and say, Hey, my husband is not following the basic minimum standards of care for me. I'm being starved. He's he's refusing to give me food to get refusing to give me clothing, refusing to give me my marital rights. And the court could say to him, Hey buddy, either shape up or you need to divorce her and give her a certificate of divorce.

**Gretchen Baskerville:** And sometimes the man was just kind of a miserly dude. You know, he just liked having her around. Maybe she was a great cook. Maybe she was his first wife, but his third wife was sexier. And, you know, he just wanted to save a little money on wife number one by not taking care of her. But at the same time, he didn't want to lose her either. You know, she was better at weaving than wife number three or, you know, better at cooking. And so these guys would actually try to get away with it. Try to get away with not providing the basic level of standards of care and then also not divorcing her, giving her certificate of divorce so she could go marry someone else. So it was a real problem. And so what would happen? And we find this in ancient Jewish literature. The court would actually find some gentiles who would beat the husband until he volunteered to give the wife a certificate of divorce. Women couldn't until about the time of Jesus women. It was just women could not do the same kinds of things that that men could do.