



THE PASTOR'S VOICE

Insights from Church Leaders

The Pastor's Voice Podcast: Episode 12

Transcript: Abusive Relationships and the Culture War on Marriage

Reuel Sample: In the Old Testament, we see an outlet for divorce. We see laws that are in the Talmud and other places for both men and women to get to get out of an abusive or unfulfilling marriage. So why are churches so reluctant to embrace this idea today?

Gretchen Baskerville: Yeah, I think part of it is that we have made divorce a culture war issue. And, you know, we've had other culture war issues in the past, but today it is a culture war issue.

Reuel Sample: Now when you when you say culture war, you're basically saying that we as Christians have have drawn the line at the sanctity of marriage is that is that Christians are committed to marriage, they're committed to keeping things going and that's what separates us from them.

Gretchen Baskerville: Right. It's sort of this litmus test, and because some of some leaders in Christianity, I don't know if you want me to name names have actually gone public and said, Listen, our divorce rates need to be lower than the rest of the world, and they just aren't, you know, they don't look good. And how are we going to prove that Jesus changes lives if we don't divorce less? And so this one particular Christian leader, you know, basically made it made a big deal, made divorce to be the evidence of moral decay, not the things that cause divorce. And my response to him, I I didn't reach out to him directly, but my response to that is OK. If serial adultery, if sexual immorality, if

physical violence, if emotional abuse, if family crushing addictions all ended tomorrow. We know mathematically that the divorce rate for Christians would drop in half by next year. I mean, it's it's very simple. We've already discussed that about half of divorces in the United States today are for genuinely life saving reasons, those incredibly serious reasons. So if we, as Christians want to say, Hey, we God makes a difference in our life, faith makes us better people. Ok, let's see it happen. Let's see those marriage endangering sins disappear because I guarantee our divorce rates

Reuel Sample: Will exactly is that if you focus on the quality of the people in the marriage, the character and the faithfulness in the people in the marriage, instead of focusing on a divorce rate, then the divorce rate will naturally go down. But even more importantly, the quality, the happiness and the glorification in those marriages will naturally increase.

Gretchen Baskerville: So another factor for churches why they hang on to this so much is that we really have been raised in a in a bubble and an information bubble. And who do we turn to for our information on marriage? Well, we turn to focus on the family, right, because they claim that they're a reliable source of information on marriage and therefore also divorce. The problem is that they're not. They omit a lot of the key findings of researchers over the last 30 years, or when they do quote those researchers, they distort what they say. And so we aren't being given accurate information, and that's part of the problem, too. I think if more pastors knew that when divorced, when the barriers to divorce are lowered were reduced from nineteen seventy to nineteen eighty four. An interesting thing happened 15 years afterwards, when researchers looked back at the domestic violence rate, the suicide rate and the homicide rate for wives. They had all dropped in those states that passed no fault unilateral divorce. Interesting. And so we know that divorce saves lives.

Reuel Sample: Now we want to be very clear here you're not advocating for easy divorce or divorce when things get rough.

Gretchen Baskerville: Right? Exactly. Yeah. Let me make it really clear for those of listening who are under 70 years old, you do not remember prior to nineteen sixty nine, when divorce required almost a criminal level trial. So you weren't just dissolving the marriage. There was a criminal trial that needed to take place with a judge, sometimes

with a jury, with evidence, and there needed to be, you know, a certain level of evidence to convince the judge. So it's very, very possible and indeed happened that you would have situations where there was cruelty, where there was adultery, where there was, you know, emotional hostility, hatred, vitriol and the couple would go to court and the judge would say, no, you're going to have to stay with him.

Reuel Sample: Interesting.

Gretchen Baskerville: You don't have enough evidence for the court. And so what happened in 1969 is those that evidence was at least for the purposes of ending the marriage dropped. Now there's still courts still use evidence for determining, you know, who's going to get custody of the children, but you can still get divorced, whether or not you have that level of evidence. And so when I say divorce became, the impediments to divorce came down. What I'm saying is we no longer have to go through a criminal level trial with criminal level evidence because that for people in emotional abuse and even sometimes physically abusive situations, there isn't any evidence or the evidence has disappeared by the time you know you've you've you've, you know, thought about divorce. Another thing is a lot of victims lie to their doctors. Oh, I just fell. I slipped and fell. That's why I have this big nod on the side of my head. Oh, I hit a railing. That's why I have blunt force trauma. You know, so now what do you do? You've already lied to your doctor. You know, two years later, you realize this man isn't going to get any better. And by the way, I'm completely aware that there are violent, vicious, cruel wives as well. So I'm sorry that I'm using a feminine pronoun for the for the victim here, because I certainly know I actually know women who are domestic batterers and abusers emotionally and physically. So, you know, you've got to be able to, you know, let people out. And when we finally did from when the when we no longer had to have these criminal style trials starting from 1970 to 1984, we saw the suicide rate. Drop by. Eight to 16 percent in those states that change their laws. The domestic violence rate by and against men and women by 30 percent and the homicide rate against wives. In other words, the wife was the victim. By 10 percent. And that's just astonishing.

Reuel Sample: And it's amazing. That is amazing because once again, you hit it is that how can you prove something that only happens when the two people who are involved see it or witness it? So when you take that away, you, you open up a whole new realm of escape for people in abusive relationships.

Gretchen Baskerville: Remember, it's they're the ones with the skin in the game, right? It's their life, their children, their financial future. If they weigh and and we don't know what's going on behind closed doors, we don't know how much they can take. We don't know when enough is enough. We, as pastors and ministry leaders, we have no skin in the game. Maybe it hurts our reputation or a little bit or we feel bad or embarrassed that, you know, God didn't perform a miracle in this case. But there's nothing we have to lose, really. It's the person going through the divorce himself who is going to go through the next year or two of tremendous upheaval, pain, hurt, loneliness, fear, worry. They're going to have to be trying to calm down, keep children calm as they switch. Schools move, have to form new friendships. I mean, the incredible burden of all this change is on the person, you know, filing for divorce. I'm assuming in this case, the person is the the innocent victim of abuse or betrayal. And so they're the only one who can weigh whether or not that's a good decision for them. That's why I don't put any pressure on anyone to divorce or not divorce, because really, it is 100 percent their decision. And I'll be honest, I'll be the first one to say 10 years ago was probably the last time I made the mistake of saying, Hey, you really ought to divorce. I no longer do that.

Gretchen Baskerville: Let me go back to your original question, which is why the church's hold on to this so much hold on to the anti divorce stance. The other piece of information that never breaks through into our information bubble is the reality of 30 years of research about the effects of divorce on children. All we ever hear from focus on the family, which is our major source of information, is that divorce is universally destructive to children, and it's just not. It isn't the very people they interviewed. They quote in their online articles on the focus on the family website on the topic of children and divorce say the exact opposite thing. So focus on the family will use one quote, but there will be 10 other quotes from that person's same paper. Same study. Same writing that says, Hey, you know, if this is going on in your home, do not stay for the kids. If there is violence. If there is hostility. Don't stay for the kids. If there is high conflict, high distress. Do not stay for the kids. Because in these very high conflict homes where there is a lot of distress tension walking on eggshells. Believe it or not, and we were never told this children's well-being is up to 10 times better, 10 times higher. When we remove them out of these homes than children whose parents stay together

Reuel Sample: So their kids aren't blind, they're not deaf. They see what dad is doing to mom or what mom is doing to dad. And there's they're seeing and they're hearing and they know this isn't real or right. And so of course, they're going to be better and happier outside of that abusive marriage.

Gretchen Baskerville: Yeah, the the the way we look at it is they have their relief that they have calm in their life, they have freedom from the chaos. We're not talking about marriage divorces where somebody is looking for the green or grass or, you know, these are people who are just crawling desperately to get away from what's happening in the home. Let me give you another example. Let's take a look at the Jaffe study. We never hear this. We we, as Christians, have never been told this, but this is a massive study and it's an excellent study. It was over 1100 families. It was a twin study. And what they found is that if a parent in in their case, they did mention both antisocial mothers and antisocial fathers. But the as being tremendously problematic for children. But for the purposes of their study, they were mainly studying fathers. And what they found is that if a father had at least three out of the seven antisocial personality traits that if he resided with his children, there was a one in eight chance that his children or one of his children would develop antisocial traits, conduct disorders, behavior disorders themselves. And so and but if it was just a normal dad, a dad who did not have three or more of these antisocial traits, it was only one in three chance that a child would develop conduct disorders. So, you know, bad parents, bad fathers, bad mothers are bad for kids. Good fathers are wonderful for kids. Good mothers are wonderful for kids. I would even venture so far as to say even average. So so fathers and mothers are good for kids. But if they have three or more of these antisocial traits, these researchers actually discovered that the less time your kid spends with that parent, the better off they are, and the less likely they are to develop behavior or conduct disorders themselves.

Reuel Sample: Gretchen, I'm a graduate of one of the leading and one of the oldest seminaries in this country. I can execute in Hebrew, I can execute in Greek. I know church history in and out, but we never talked about pastoral care of those in bad marriages or how to recognize that. How can pastors get this kind of training? Because I honestly believe that most pastors, the vast majority of pastors, would not want any one of their in their flocks to stay in an abusive, harmful relationship. But oftentimes we don't

see it or we can't see it. We miss it or we we don't understand just how bad it is. What can pastors do in getting training or to open up their eyes to see what's going on?

Gretchen Baskerville: Oh, OK, I'll give you the fast way in a slow way. The slow ways to do what I've done for the last three years, which is read all the top studies on children and divorce and on unhappy marriages and how they turn out at the 12 year point at the five year point. That's the slow way because what we need to do is actually look at the research studies, not at the websites of organisations and think tanks that have an agenda. So that's the slow way, and I don't expect any pastor to do that. You've got your hands full enough. Here's the fast cheater way. Come to my website. The life saving divorce scam. I'm really sorry and look at the category. Focus on the family, and I'm sorry to to pick on focus on the family. They're not the only ones. Family life does it. A lot of these organizations will give you false information. I'm sorry to say, but what I do is I actually go through their articles and go through them claim by claim and show you where it's been misquoted or where this same researcher says the exact opposite when it comes to domestic violence or so. Let me give you if you have time, let me give you another example. Please do. Ok, so. Oh, man. About let's see when was it about 10 years ago? No, it was a little bit longer than that 15 years ago, 2002, but I think it took a while for it to kind of get out to all the pastors. There was the wait study and the weight studies is often described as saying, Hey, if you just stay in your unhappy marriage for five years, it will be better.

Gretchen Baskerville: And so pastors and and, you know, marriage at any cost, organizations would repeat this over and over and over again. I thought, Well, OK, that's interesting. But there's no way that all unhappy marriages become happy in five years. I wonder, let me just read Dr. White's book and read Dr. Wait, study myself and see if you know that kind of blanket statement is correct. When I actually read every single line and I read the study five times, I realized that what this study actually said is that nearly two thirds of unhappy couples, if they hang in there, are happy by the fifth year. But the truth of the matter is they could predict who would not become happy, and those were the the couples with domestic violence and hostility. And so those couples so slightly more than one third of the of of the sample size, the all the couples did not become happier after five years. Now, we're never really told this. Here's the other thing they never told us, and it's so shocking. They had people in the study who went ahead and divorced and remarried within the five years of the study. And shockingly, eighty one

percent of those were actually happy in their second marriage. Now I, you know, pastors don't think for two seconds I am recommending, you know, quickie divorce, quickie remarriage. I am not doing that. You're talking to a woman. You're listening to a woman who was single for 20 years after her divorce. So I'm I'm not that woman.

Gretchen Baskerville: But just to give you when you actually read the studies, you find something completely different from what you're hearing from the organizations we have trusted. So be really cautious about quoting marriage at any cost organizations because they are misleading us. You can. Another way you could do it is just buy my book. Sorry, shameless plug for my book *The Life Saving Divorce*. Chapter seven is all about kids and divorce, and it debunks all of the statements that we get from a marriage motoring or the. It's called the marriage at any cost organizations. I mean, they don't they don't even make any kind of allowance for divorce, for abuse. The other thing you can look at is Chapter 10. In my book *The Life Saving Book Divorce*. I'm sorry because that goes over how you as a parent are likely to come out. People don't realize, let's say, let's take a person who has a history of major depressive episodes. I mean, this is a serious thing. They now will. I'm going to say it right up front. We'll divorce. Solve your major depression. No, no, I'm not going to make that claim. But what researchers found is that four out of 10 people who divorced to get out of their destructive relationship said that their major depression reduced. In fact, some never had another depression major depressive episode during the course of the study. And I've got and I've got all the links, all this. I have two hundred and twenty citations in my book because I don't expect anyone to take my word for it. Go look at the research yourself.

Reuel Sample: Next week, I conclude my discussion with Gretchen by talking about specific ways the church must respond to divorce brought about by violence and abuse. We have included a list of vital links, including how to purchase Gretchen's book at our website. Please also consider supporting this ministry by using the support to show Link. If you have any questions about our podcast would like to be a guest or would like to become a sponsor. Please email us at podcasts at the pastor's voice dot net. I am Reuel sample. Thank you for listening.