

A HIGH VIEW OF MARRIAGE

PART 1

MACARTHUR BLVD BAPTIST CHURCH

OUR BELIEF REGARDING MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Marriage was created by God. Genesis 1-2 clarifies this truth by laying for us a foundation for marriage, family, sexuality, and gender. In these two chapters, there are four foundational ideas on which we build our understanding of marriage. First, there is distinction. God created both genders, male and female, as distinct creations. Second, there is complement. God created woman, uniquely and specifically, as the perfect complement for man. Third, there is union. Because of their distinction and complementary nature, God called the man to leave his father and mother, to cling to his wife in marriage, and for the two to become one flesh. Finally, there is procreation. God created male and female as distinct yet complementary creations, so that they might be joined together and be fruitful and multiply. Therefore, God defines marriage as a permanent union between

one man and one woman. Because marriage was created by God, only God can define it and anything that goes outside of God's parameters is a perversion of his perfect design. Marriage was created by God.

Marriage was created for God. Everything God creates, He creates for a purpose. The ultimate purpose of all things, including marriage, is to bring God glory. Marriage uniquely brings God glory in many ways. Marriage brings God glory by reflecting the nature and character of God by reflecting the love, unity, and diversity of roles within the Triune Godhead. Marriage brings God glory by giving the world a picture of the relationship between Christ and His church; a relationship of sacrificial love, joyful submission, and an unbreakable bond. God also uses marriage to glorify himself by using it to help man and woman accomplish their God given assignments and conforming them into His image. Marriage matters because it was created by God and for God.

Unfortunately, sin has marred the marriage relationship. When we fail to submit to God's perfect plan and walk in Spirit empowered obedience to Him, we fail to accomplish God's purposes for marriage. Homosexuality, infidelity, polygamy, fornication, and divorce are all the result of sinful rebellion against the King of the universe and are contrary to God's ORIGINAL will for the marriage relationship. The source of all marital strife and perversion is sin, which seeks to find satisfaction outside of God's ordained provision. But there is hope for marriage because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel teaches us that Christ has purchased victory over the penalty and power of sin by His death on the cross. By God's grace, Christians have the power to fulfill God's purpose for marriage and overcome the many challenges sin brings against the marriage relationship. Given the low status quo for marriage in contemporary culture and what is at stake in the marriage relationship, Christians must fight hard, putting God-centered and Gospel-centered concerns ahead of their own, to have marriages that accurately display the nature of God and the Gospel. Marriage is larger than any one individual; therefore, selfish concerns in marriage must give way to Kingdom concerns that pursue God's glory rather than personal fulfillment or happiness.

DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

Marriage is a covenant between husband, wife, and God (*Prov. 2:16-17; Mal. 2:14*). It is not a contract that may be broken if certain stipulations are not met by the parties involved. The Bible is clear that God hates divorce (*Mal. 2:13-16*) and always desires reconciliation instead (*Matt. 18:21-35; 2 Cor. 5:17-19*). Divorce distorts the picture of the unity of the Triune Godhead, the unconditional, eternal, and sacrificial love Christ has for His church, and the joyful submission the church has for her Groom. Members of MacArthur Blvd will be counseled away from pursuing a divorce and toward reconciliation.

The question does arise whether or not the Bible permits divorce and/or remarriage under certain exceptional circumstances. Before addressing this question, it should be acknowledged that there are only two scenarios where the Bible possibly permits divorce: adultery and abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. In the case of abandonment, divorce is only permitted by default as a believer who is abandoned is being divorced against their will. The disagreements that do exist regarding the permissibility of divorce and remarriage only concern these two scenarios. Outside of these two scenarios, the Bible is clear: divorce goes against the will of God.

DOES THE BIBLE EVER ALLOW A CHRISTIAN TO PURSUE DIVORCE?

But does the Bible indeed allow for divorce when a spouse has committed adultery? While this is a debated topic within evangelicalism, where even godly, Bible-believing Christians disagree, the pastors of MacArthur Blvd do not believe adultery or abandonment gives Christians permission to initiate a divorce.

The reason many evangelicals believe that the Bible allows believers to initiate divorce in cases of adultery is because of the so-called “exception clause” found in *Matt. 5:32* and *19:9*. Before providing two possible interpretations of these verses, here are five reasons we do not believe these verses provide an exception (i.e. adultery) whereby a person may divorce his or her spouse.

Five reasons not to interpret the “exception clause” as allowing for divorce

1. Jesus had already definitively answered the question regarding the permissibility of divorce in verse 6 of Matthew 19 when He quotes from Genesis 2:24 and says, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” This, in fact, is Jesus’ consistent teaching regarding divorce throughout the Gospels (*cf. Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18*), where the exception clause is not mentioned at all. To interpret the exception clause as an allowance for divorce seems to go against not only the immediate context of Matthew 19 but also the other instances in the Gospels where Jesus teaches on divorce. We are not saying that if the New Testament taught the exception principle more, then it would be valid; a single teaching in the New Testament is sufficient. What we are saying here is that Jesus’ consistent teaching against divorce argues against interpreting the exception clause as meaning divorce is allowed when adultery occurs.

2. Paul seems to interpret Jesus’ teaching as not allowing divorce in any scenario. He writes in *1 Cor. 7:10-11*:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

Providing his own inspired interpretation of Jesus’ teaching on divorce, which the apostle would have had access to by the time he authored *1 Corinthians*, Paul mentions no exception when divorce is permitted but understood Jesus’ prohibition against divorce to be absolute.

3. To interpret *Matthew 19:9* as an exception when divorce is permitted goes against the teachings Jesus had just provided in the previous chapter on forgiveness (*Matt. 18:21-35*). Jesus expects His followers to offer forgiveness to others “seventy times seven” times since they are ones who have received forgiveness themselves from God.

4. If Matt. 19:9 provides as an exception when divorce is permitted when adultery occurs, then the disciples' reaction in 19:10 makes no sense. The disciples respond to Jesus' teaching by saying, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." In other words, the disciples were shocked that Jesus went as far as He did in His teaching about divorce. Their shock suggests that Jesus' view was stricter than any other view of the day. However, the belief that divorce was only permitted in cases of adultery was a common view of the day. It was the teaching of one of the two major rabbinical positions on the issue, the Hillelite position. If Jesus was simply siding with the rabbi Hillel, the disciples' reaction does not make sense.

5. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to interpret the exception clause as allowing for divorce contradicts the very reason God created marriage. First, marriage was created to display the unbreakable unity of the Triune Godhead; divorce distorts the image of God. Second, marriage was created to display the Gospel. Ephesians 5:22-33 teaches that the roles between husband and wife reflect the covenant relationship between Christ and the church. Neither a man nor a woman can divorce their spouse on the basis of adultery and at the same time fulfill the commands they are given in this passage of joyful submission and Christ-like love. Especially relevant in this passage is that marriage is supposed to display the covenant love Jesus has for His bride. This is an unconditional love that perseveres even when the children of God act unfaithfully. The purpose of marriage to display the nature of God and the Gospel makes it highly unlikely that Jesus would provide any allowance for divorce.

Then what does the "Exception Clause" mean?

If the exception clause in Matthew's Gospel does not teach that it is okay to divorce one's spouse in cases of adultery, then what does it teach? We acknowledge that this is a difficult question to answer. However, we believe there are at least two possible interpretations of the exception clause other than the interpretation that it is allowing for divorce in cases of adultery.

1. The "Compounding Sin" Interpretation:

This interpretation points out that while divorce is mentioned in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, it is not the specific sin that is being addressed in these verses. Rather, the sin being addressed is the sin of adultery that occurs when one marries another following a divorce:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. – Mathew 5:32

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. – Matthew 19:9

In other words, in these verses Jesus is addressing instances when remarriage following divorce results in adultery and when it does not; He is not addressing in these verses situations when divorce is justified. The exception clause ("except for sexual immorality") is stipulating not when divorce is or is not sin, but if the sin of adultery is or is not being committed when one remarries following a divorce. There are two distinct sins in view: divorce and adultery. The exception clause is not an exception when divorce is not a sinful choice; Jesus' consistent teachings are clear that divorce is always a sinful choice and is the result of hardness of heart. Rather, the exception clause provides one exception when remarriage following a divorce is not a sinful choice.

The focus in the Matthew 5:32 verse is the "innocent" party who was divorced. Jesus is saying that if a man divorces his wife, he causes her to commit adultery by forcing her into a situation where she will likely take another husband. This is true except when the man divorced his wife on the basis of adultery; in such an instance, the man is not making her commit adultery, but rather, she commits adultery on her own by being unfaithful. Again, Jesus is not saying that the man is justified in divorcing his wife when she commits adultery; He is saying that the man is not guilty of forcing his wife into a situation to commit adultery if she has

already been unfaithful. Thus, he is still guilty of divorce, but free from the compounding sin of making his wife commit adultery.

In the Matthew 19:9 verse, the focus is not on the “innocent” party, but rather on the party who is pursuing a divorce. Again, this verse is not addressing when divorce is or is not justified. Jesus had already dealt with that by saying “what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (19:6). On the contrary, in verse 9 Jesus is addressing when the divorcing party is also guilty of adultery. Accordingly, they are also guilty of the sin of adultery if they remarry, unless their former spouse had already committed adultery themselves. Thus, these verses seem to imply that once the sexual union has been broken by one party through sexual immorality, the other party is not charged with adultery if he or she chooses to remarry after divorce.

In both of these verses, Jesus is NOT addressing when it is justified to divorce one’s spouse. Rather, He is addressing whether or not the sin of adultery is committed in remarriage following the divorce. The focus in these two verses is not pre-divorce (when can I divorce my spouse) but rather post-divorce (now that I am divorced, am I guilty of adultery if I remarry). Thus, these verses are consistent with the rest of Scripture that it is never biblically justifiable for a believer to pursue divorce.

2. The “Betrothal” Interpretation:

This interpretation argues that “sexual immorality” (porneia) in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, does not refer to adultery of one’s spouse, but to premarital sexual fornication that occurs during the betrothal period. In Hebrew culture, the betrothal period was a period of time in which man and woman were committed to marrying one another but whose marriage was not yet finalized and consummated. Betrothal was similar to modern-day engagement, only much more significant. During the betrothal period, the man and woman were spoken of as husband and wife (e.g. 2 Cor. 11:2). If this was the intended meaning of “sexual immorality” in the exception clause, then Jesus is not providing grounds for divorcing one’s spouse, but rather

grounds for dissolving one’s betrothal: one may dissolve his betrothal and marry another without being guilty of adultery if during the betrothal period it is discovered that the woman had committed sexual immorality.

A key reason for this interpretation is that Matthew uses a general Greek word for sexual immorality in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, porneia, rather than the specific Greek word for adultery, moicheia.

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality (porneia), and marries another, commits adultery (moicheia). – Matthew 19:9

It is argued that if Matthew intended to convey that Jesus said, “except for adultery,” He would have used moicheia rather than porneia since moicheia is the word Matthew seems to prefer to describe adultery. For example, the only other place, outside of 5:32 and 19:9, where Matthew uses these two words is in 15:19 where he clearly distinguishes porneia (“sexual immorality”) from moicheia (“adultery”).

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery (moicheia), sexual immorality (porneia), theft, false witness, slander. – Matthew 15:19

Why would Matthew’s Gospel alone address the issue of unfaithfulness during the betrothal period when none of the other Gospel writers do? One possible explanation may be that Matthew alone needed to confirm the innocence of separating from a woman with whom you are betrothed if you learn she has committed sexual immorality, since his is the only Gospel to tell us that Joseph was “just” when he “resolved” to separate from Mary when she became pregnant (Matt. 1:18-19). Matthew intends to make it clear that Joseph would have been biblically justified in separating from Mary if Mary had been guilty of premarital fornication.

Based upon the totality of biblical teaching on marriage and divorce, we do not believe a Christian should ever initiate or pursue a divorce, including situations when adultery has occurred. While the exception clause passages in Matthew are difficult to interpret, both of the possible interpretations

included here seem much more likely than the interpretation that Jesus is allowing one to pursue divorce on the basis of adultery.

The other key passage we have not yet addressed is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, which addresses, among other things, Christians who are abandoned by an unbelieving spouse. As was mentioned above, divorce is only "permitted" in this scenario by default since the believer is being left against their will. However, the question regarding the permissibility of remarriage arises. It is to this question that we now turn.

MAY A CHRISTIAN WHO IS DIVORCED REMARRY, AND IF SO, UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES?

From the outset, we should say that the Bible is clear that once a Christian's spouse or ex-spouse dies, that person is free to remarry another believer (1 Cor. 7:39). *Beyond death, however, are there any other scenarios when a divorced Christian may remarry, and if so, what are the situations?*

We do not believe the Bible teaches that whether or not one was a Christian when the divorce occurred, or whether or not one initiated the divorce, are the determining factors for when a Christian is free to remarry following a divorce. The words of Jesus in Matthew 5:32 are very significant here. In this verse Jesus says that if a man divorces his wife he "makes her commit adultery." As was explained above in the compounding sin interpretation of this verse, the reason Jesus says this is because the divorcing man is putting his wife into a situation where she will likely remarry. Thus, you have in this verse a scenario where a woman was divorced against her will (she did not initiate or pursue divorce), and yet Jesus still refers to her remarriage as "adultery." Thus, it is not a matter of who initiates and pursues the divorce that stipulates whether remarriage is allowed. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:15 that a believer is not "enslaved" if they are abandoned, he is likely not intending to say that they are free to remarry, but that they should not feel an ongoing burden of responsibility to fight for reconciliation once their spouse has divorced them. They are not bound to continue attempting to convince their now ex-spouse to come back, which would likely entail a lifetime of conflict between

the believer and their ex-spouse. This is likely why Paul says, "God has called us to peace."

Is it ever permissible, then, for a believer to remarry after a divorce? According to Matthew 5:32, 19:9, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, the only instance when a Christian may remarry following a divorce and it not be counted as adultery, seems to be when their ex-spouse has themselves committed adultery by consummating a marriage with another person. This seems to be Jesus' point in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, that once the sexual union has been broken by one party, the sin of adultery is counted to that party and thus the other party is not guilty of adultery if they remarry following the divorce. Thus, a believer may only remarry following a divorce (regardless of who initiated the divorce) and not be guilty of adultery only when the other party has themselves committed adultery. The adultery that Jesus speaks of in the exception clause of Matthew 19:9, seems to refer to a form of adultery that makes reconciliation impossible (i.e. they remarry). Thus, as long as reconciliation is possible (i.e. the ex-spouse is alive and has not remarried), one is not permitted to remarry without being guilty of adultery. This conclusion is supported by Paul's admonition to the Corinthians. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. – 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul's words imply that so long as reconciliation is possible, a person should not remarry.

When all these verses are taken together, the conclusion is that a Christian should not pursue divorce, even when adultery occurs. Christians who have been divorced and who remarry when their ex-spouse is living are guilty of adultery, unless their ex-spouse has themselves committed adultery by consummating a new marriage themselves.

PASTORAL CONCLUSIONS

We acknowledge that both of the alternative interpretations of the exception clause in Matthew articulated in this document have their problems, although we believe that they have fewer problems than the interpretation that Jesus is allowing for divorce in cases of adultery. We also acknowledge that our own conclusion, that adultery and abandonment do not give Christians permission to initiate divorce, is a minority position even within conservative evangelicalism. Whether or not adultery provides an allowance for divorce is a difficult question, one where even good, Bible-believing Christians may disagree. Therefore, the pastors of MacArthur Blvd have arrived at the following conclusions for how we will lead and shepherd the membership of MacArthur Blvd:

1. Members of MacArthur Blvd will be counseled away from pursuing divorce and toward reconciliation, even in instances when adultery has been committed. If the spouse who committed adultery is a member of our church, he or she will be expected to work with a pastor and/or marriage mentor along with their spouse to go through the process of confession and repentance.
2. Since we acknowledge the difficulty of interpreting the intended meaning of the exception clause and since many within our own church believe that adultery does provide an allowance for divorce, THEREFORE, if a member of MacArthur Blvd chooses to divorce their spouse on the basis of unrepentant adultery or if they are divorced as the result of abandonment, then the body of MacArthur Blvd will not bring church discipline against that member. By "unrepentant adultery" we mean adultery where the guilty party is not remorseful and is not willing to terminate the adulterous relationship. In a scenario where a spouse commits adultery, confesses the act as sin, turns away from the adulterous relationship, and walks through the steps of reconciliation outlined by the pastors and/or marriage mentors of the church, the innocent spouse would be expected to pursue reconciliation also. By "abandonment" we mean that the believing spouse was separated from and divorced (against their will) by their spouse.
3. If a member of MacArthur Blvd chooses to pursue a divorce against their spouse on grounds besides adultery or abandonment, then our church body will begin the process of church discipline as prescribed by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 since the Bible clearly teaches that such an action is directly against the revealed will of God.
4. Regarding remarriage following a divorce, the pastors of MacArthur Blvd will always counsel a believer who has been divorced against remarrying as long their ex-spouse is still living and has not themselves remarried. We believe that the Bible only allows for remarriage when reconciliation is no longer possible due to the ex-spouse remarrying and thus committing adultery. When this occurs, we believe that the other spouse will not be considered guilty of adultery if he or she remarries.
5. Since we acknowledge the difficulty in interpreting the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 and Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7:15, and since there are many within our own church who believe that an abandoned spouse and a spouse who is divorced on the basis of adultery is free to remarry regardless of whether or not their ex-spouse has remarried, THEREFORE, if a member of MacArthur Blvd remarries after being abandoned or after being divorced on the basis of unrepentant adultery, then the body of MacArthur Blvd will not bring church discipline against that member even if their ex-spouse has not remarried. In such cases, it will be up to the conscience of the individual pastors of MacArthur Blvd whether or not they choose to officiate a wedding under this scenario.
6. If a member of MacArthur Blvd chooses to remarry following a divorce that occurred for any reason other than unrepentant adultery or abandonment, while their ex-spouse has not remarried, then our church body will begin the process of church discipline as prescribed by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 since the Bible clearly teaches that such an action is directly against the revealed will of God.
7. If a person's spouse or ex-spouse dies, then that person is free to remarry another believer (1 Cor. 7:39).

8. If a spouse or any children living at home are the victim of abuse, he/she should separate from the abuser for the sake of their own safety and the safety of any children. He/she should immediately report the abuse to local law enforcement. We encourage the victim of abuse to make the Pastors aware of the situation. The Pastors will come alongside the victims to offer ministry and guidance on what steps should be taken. The Pastors will also engage the abuser with the Gospel, providing a plan aimed at biblical repentance and restoration. The priority of the Pastors and our church in handling situations involving abuse will be to protect the wellbeing of those who are vulnerable and/or unable to protect themselves.
9. If any Christian is in a marriage that was entered into upon unbiblical grounds, they should acknowledge and confess their sin in that decision but remain faithful to their current spouse. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. God is always faithful to forgive sin, and He is able to use these marriages to exalt His name and display His Gospel.
10. Any member of MacArthur Blvd who is considering separation or divorce from their spouse should make the pastors aware of this before any actions are taken so that we can come alongside to provide them with the help and encouragement they need and to shepherd them to move forward in a manner that exalts Christ.

CONCLUSION

At MacArthur Blvd we want to speak the truth in love (*Eph. 4:15*). On one hand we never want to compromise biblical standards concerning marriage due to cultural influences. We want to shine as light in the midst of darkness. On the other hand, we want to be quick to extend grace, patience, and love to those who are struggling in marriage. Biblical truth and love never contradict. Our desire is not to 'cast out' those who have walked or who are walking through a divorce. Rather, we want to come alongside couples who are struggling and help them walk in a manner that will bring glory to the name of Christ and authentic joy in their own lives.

One way we do this at MacArthur Blvd is through our Marriage Mentor ministry. We encourage the couples of MacArthur Blvd to avail themselves of marriage mentoring before their relationship is in crisis and certainly before any decision to divorce their spouse is made. God intends for members of the church to be invested in each other's lives (*Gal. 6:1; Heb. 10:24-25; James 5:16*). We need each other. We expect the members of MacArthur Blvd to reject isolation and to allow the church family into their lives and marital difficulties. God is willing to extend grace to those who turn to Him by turning to His body, the church, for help in times of marital crisis rather than distancing themselves from the church.

You can access information concerning the Marriage Mentor ministry on our website:

www.macarthurblvd.org/connect/adults/discipleship

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