

Position Paper on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Mike Falkenstine

MARRIAGE

God is overwhelmingly serious about the sacredness of marriage, and as His followers and servants it is our privilege to share this high view. Every passing year has brought a steady increase in both the numbers of and ease with which one can file for divorce in our land. Therefore, it is more important than ever to reiterate the wisdom and goodness of God's plan for marriage.

As a result of the constant increase in the number of relationships ending in divorce, I am compelled to reassert a biblical view of marriage, divorce and remarriage that I prayerfully hold to based on my understanding of God's Word. The Bible clearly teaches that the Lord, in His creation of Adam and Eve as husband and wife, so designed that marriage should be lifelong, covenantal, monogamous and between male and female. In addition, Scripture explicitly commands that a believer is not to be "joined together" with an unbeliever.

Conclusion: Marriage was uniquely created by God for the display of His glory and is a portrait of God's relation to His people and Jesus' love for the church (and therefore how the church is to be devoted to Christ).

Suggested Scripture Study: Genesis 2:18-24, Malachi 2:14-16, Matthew 19:3-6, Romans 7:2, 1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 5:22-33

DIVORCE

There is very little in life more personally destructive or painful than divorce, so it is not surprising that God so dislikes it. In fact, He hates it! God loves people, including those who have been through the divorce process.

Just as the pain of divorce soaks through our culture, it likewise soaks through the church, and so with sensitive hearts, I weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn as a result of divorce. Given the tremendous emotional pain involved with this topic, I seek to be clear, compassionate and careful when sharing my convictions. My heart is to be faithful to God's Word and loving to God's people. Consistent with my core values, I want to be firm where the Bible is firm and flexible where it is flexible, appropriately trusting each individual's convictions to our Father.

It is my firmly held belief that divorce was never intended to be part of God's design and is always costly to the divorcing parties, connected children and society. While God hates divorce, He does not hate divorcees. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin, but it is a result of sin and hardness of heart. Divorce is never God's best, and anyone who loves God and knows of His goodness would never consider it without broad input from community and spiritual counsel. Even when divorce is necessary to protect individuals from danger/abuse, it is to be done as an expression of love and in hopes of producing repentance in the guilty party that leads to healing and reconciliation. Even in these extreme cases, divorce is never to be considered as the end to a relationship, but only a severe mercy that will ultimately lead to less sin and eventual restoration of the relationship.

Whenever discussing possible situations that might allow for divorce, it is imperative that serious believers continually reiterate their desire and deep conviction that the hopeful resolution to all marital strife is reconciliation (restoring a marriage, of course, depends on two tender hearts). In other words, just as I never encourage anyone to rush *into* marriage, I likewise never encourage anyone to rush *out* of marriage. Forgiveness and reconciliation are clearly near to the heart of Jesus' life and message. That said, after many years of extensive study, thought, prayer, dialogue and debate, I understand that God's best for this body of believers is to handle the difficult topic of divorce (and subsequently remarriage) as follows:

Sexual Immorality: The "exception clause" for divorce (Matthew 19:3-9) which mentions sexual immorality (*porneia*) is not a permission slip or loophole which would allow or in any way recommend divorce as an appropriate action for an offended Christ follower. Just as God's gracious covenant of love ultimately overcomes Israel's infidelity (Jeremiah 3), the covenant love modeled by God's people can, and should, overcome the immense pain and hurt of infidelity. As a result, where a spouse has been unfaithful, I am committed to counsel the faithful spouse to uphold the sacredness of the marriage covenant and to pursue and exhaust every means necessary to **grant forgiveness and reconciliation** (rather than expeditiously pointing he or she to the exception). The expectation of Scripture is that followers of Jesus *first* and *always* be for **genuine repentance and restoration** of the marriage by calling the unfaithful spouse to be reconciled to God.

Conclusion: There is a broad call on the believer's life to a ministry of reconciliation and this certainly includes the Christian marriage. Even in cases of adultery in the marriage, divorce is *never* the first option and rarely the final option. I am fully committed to wisely and cautiously counseling toward repentance and restoration of the relationship. Though the humble work of forgiving, peacemaking and reconciliation may not be easy, the effort is worth seeing God glorified and His children walking in the light.

Suggested Scripture to Study: Genesis 2:18-24, Malachi 2:14-16, Jeremiah, Hosea, Matthew 19:3-9, Mark 10:1-12, Luke 16:18, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Colossians 1:19-22

Abandonment: A tenderhearted marriage consisting of two Christ-followers is always God's "ideal." Hard hearts cannot support a marriage, and it is not uncommon to find a *hard* heart in the midst of a "mixed" marriage (i.e., one composed of a believing and an unbelieving spouse). Though Scripture suggests that a "mixed" marriage, once it exists, is preferable to divorce (1 Cor 7), the Scripture allows for divorce when an *unbelieving* spouse insists on divorcing a *believing* spouse.

Conclusion: Though the "mixed" marriage may end in divorce, the believing spouse *is not* given permission to *initiate* divorce. Rather (as mentioned in the *sexual immorality* conclusion above), the faithful, believing spouse should grant forgiveness, work through difficult circumstances and push for reconciliation.

Suggested Scripture Study: 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 14-16, 1 Peter 3:1-2

Abuse: It is never my counsel to recommend to a spouse to stay physically present in a physically abusive situation. Additionally, in a home where there is physical abuse and physical danger to children, prudence (Proverbs 22:10) demands action. Where obvious danger exists for either a spouse or child, I support the execution of all appropriate means to bring the abuse to an immediate halt including separation, church discipline, police action, a court order and other kinds of intervention by church members, family and friends. When all means of biblical

intervention have been deployed and yet denied by the unrepentant spouse, he or she will then be treated as an unbeliever. Should the unrepentant spouse (unbeliever) “force the issue” by insisting on divorce, Scripture calls the offended spouse to allow for divorce that is clearly initiated by the unrepentant spouse (unbeliever).

Conclusion: Though I realize that extreme cases of abuse may escalate to a level where an unrepentant spouse (unbeliever) abandons the offended spouse (believer), I stop short of stating that physical abuse, *without* appropriate biblical intervention, *justifies* divorce. Even in cases where divorce (legal action) is the only loving recourse to protect the sinning party from continuing in his/her sin, any action taken by the believing spouse is to be done with a heart toward eventual healing and reconciliation as God allows.

Suggested Scripture Study: Matthew 18:15-17, Romans 13:1-5, 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3: 12-17, 1 Peter 3:1-2

REMARRIAGE

While there is a broad range of convictions on the issue of divorce among serious students of Scripture, there is an even greater variety of positions when it comes to remarriage. I am continually devoting myself to struggle in prayer on how to best honor Jesus and glorify God in my teaching/convictions on this issue. After carefully reading through the *sexual immorality, abandonment* and *abuse* sections above, an obvious “guiding principle” I have a call to a “ministry of reconciliation.” Before I ask when/if remarriage after divorce is permissible, I must first ask if reconciliation is a viable option. Even in the most heartbreaking cases of sexual immorality, the most perplexing cases of abandonment and the most gut-wrenching cases of abuse, as long as **the former spouse has not remarried or is not deceased**, I believe that reconciliation *is* a viable option. While in a season where the possibility of reconciliation exists, I believe it best honors Jesus that one should remain single or be reconciled in marriage to the ex-spouse.

Conclusion: Freedom to remarry *is not* determined by the guilt or innocence of either spouse, whether either spouse is a believer or not, nor by whether divorce happened before or after either spouse’s conversion. It is my humble conviction that freedom to remarry *is* to be considered permissible only when the former spouse is deceased or has entered into a marital covenant with another party.

Suggested Scripture Study: Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 19:3-9, Mark 10:1-12, Luke 16:18, Romans 7:2, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 15, 39

My thanks to the Elders at Watermark Community Church, who were the original authors of this document, and I had a hard time disagreeing with much of what they wrote, and they’ve given me permission to take it as my own position paper. While I did add quite a bit of my own content, I’m very thankful for their scholarship and wisdom.

Disclaimer: *The views and opinions expressed in this position paper mine and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any church or group where I may speak. Although I believe this position paper is Biblically accurate and represents the full measure of what the Bible would say about this topic, I also realize that people who I believe to be fully devoted followers of Jesus may disagree with me on my conclusions on this topic.*