

# **DIVORCE and REMARRIAGE**

Written by: John MacArthur, Jr. (www.gty.org)

## **PREFACE**

Recognizing that the Bible is the very Word of the Living God to man, and understanding the priority of knowing and obeying its truths, the elders at Grace Community Church are deeply committed to study and teach with diligence and authority.

Thus, the central ministry of Grace Church is the continuous imparting of the Scripture to the people of God that they may know God and serve Him in worship and ministry.

Through their years of study, training and teaching, the elders have come to convictions regarding the major theological truths of the Bible. This little booklet presents one of these truths which reflect the heart of the teaching here at Grace. --- John MacArthur, Jr.

**1. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).** Divorce in the Scripture is permitted as an accommodation to man's sin for the protection of the innocent party. Since divorce is only a concession to man's sin and is not a part of God's original plan for marriage, all believers considering divorce should have the same attitude toward divorce as does God.

Notice that in Matthew 19:5-9, Christ teaches that divorce is an accommodation to man's sin and is in violation of God's purpose for the intimate unity of the marriage bond (cf. Gen. 2:24).

It was a concession for the "innocent party" due to the insensitivity of the other partner to God. This is defined biblically as the "hardness of heart" (Matt. 19:8). Dissolution meant that the innocent party no longer had to remain in a hopeless and intolerable situation (Matt. 5:32, 19:9; I Cor. 7:12-15). It is to be expected that a believer will have the same attitude toward divorce as does God and will see it as a violation of God's expressed purpose for marriage.

**2. The only biblical grounds for divorce are** (1) fornication (any sinful sexual activity, including adultery--unfaithfulness of a marriage partner), or (2) a nonbelieving partner who initiates the divorce due to incompatibility with a Christian.

The first is fornication, which seems to cover a wide area of sexual activity such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality and incest (Matt. 5:32; Mk. 19:9; I Cor. 5:1). Adultery will take place even after the "official" dissolution of the marriage if the divorce is on nonbiblical grounds (Matt. 5:32; Mk. 10:11,12).

The second reason for permitting a divorce is in cases where a nonbelieving mate refuses to live with his or her believing spouse, especially because of his or her Christian testimony (1 Cor. 7:12-15).

It is essential to keep in mind that the Bible merely permits divorce in these limited circumstances but never commands divorce. (This is clearly indicated in Hosea 1-3, where the adulterous wife is forgiven and restored.)

**3. Remarriage is permitted for the innocent party when the divorce was on biblical grounds.** In cases where a divorce was obtained between believers on nonbiblical grounds, the

person who remarries first commits "adultery" (Matt. 19:9) and the person who marries a person who was divorced on nonbiblical grounds also commits adultery (Lk. 16:18).

According to the Old Testament pattern, remarriage was allowed after the divorce (the exception is found in Deut. 24:1-4). The New Testament allows for remarriage when the divorce was based upon biblical grounds (I Cor. 7:15). In cases where the divorce was not for the two reasons stated above, the believer is exhorted to (1) seek for reconciliation, or else (2) remain unmarried (I Cor. 7:10-11).

When one party remarries after a divorce which was on nonbiblical grounds, that person has committed adultery because God did not recognize the validity of the divorce (Matt. 5:32; Mk. 10:11). Since the remarried partner has "committed adultery," the marriage bond is now broken and the remaining partner is free to remarry.

The Bible gives a word of caution to anyone who is considering marriage to a divorcee. If the divorce was not on biblical grounds, the person who marries the divorcee is considered an adulterer (Mark 10:12).

**4. Believers who pursue divorce on nonbiblical grounds are subject to church discipline because they openly reject the Word of God.** The one who obtains a divorce on nonbiblical grounds and remarries is living in a state of "adultery" since God did not recognize the validity of the original divorce (Matt. 5:32, Mk. 10:11-12). That person is subject to the steps of church discipline as outlined in Matt. 18:15-17 and as illustrated in I Cor. 5:1-13.

**5. Salvation means that a person begins a new life.** The believer is responsible to live up to what God has revealed about marriage and divorce from the point of his or her salvation.

According to 2 Cor. 5:17, the believer has become a "new creature" when he or she accepts Christ as personal Savior. This does not mean that Christ immediately erases painful memories, bad habits or the underlying causes for past marital problems, but that He begins a process of transformation through the Holy Spirit and the Word. A sign of saving faith will be a receptivity and a willingness to obey what Christ has revealed about marriage and divorce through the Word.

The apostle Paul's counsel in I Cor. 7:20, 27 is that a believer is to see every circumstance that they are in when they became a believer as from God. If they were called while married, they are not to seek a divorce (except on the grounds given in Matt. 5:32, 19:9; I Cor. 7:12-16). If they were called while divorced, they are free to be remarried to another believer (2 Cor. 6:14).

**6. In cases where divorce took place on nonbiblical grounds and where the guilty party repents, the grace of God is operative at the point of repentance.** It is assumed that the repentant party will endeavor to restore the marriage whenever possible as a sign of true repentance.

In other words, where two believers were divorced on nonbiblical grounds, the grace of God becomes operative at the point of repentance and confession, and they can once again experience the joy of their relationship with Christ and their mate.

A true sign of repentance will be a desire to implement I Cor. 7:11. This involves a willingness to remain unmarried or else to be reconciled to their mate.

In cases where a believer obtained a divorce on nonbiblical grounds and remarried, the second marriage union is recognized as living in "adultery" (Mk. 10:11-12). If repentance takes place, it is recognized that to obtain a second divorce would disobey Scripture (Deut. 24:1-4). Hence, they are to remain in the second marriage.

**7. The church has a responsibility to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage, especially as exemplified by its leadership.** In cases where there has been a divorce in a person's past, the church has an obligation to restrict, for a period of time, the person's involvement in leadership until it can be proven that the present marriage exemplifies Christ's relationship to His church. I Timothy 3:2, 12 sets the marital qualification for leadership within the church. The phrase "the husband of one wife" does not mean that a person cannot have had a divorce in his past since none of the other qualifications listed refer to specific acts in the past (prior to salvation or subsequent to salvation) but rather to qualities which currently characterize a man's life.

It is especially important, in cases where there has been a divorce in a man's past, that there be a period of careful observation to see that his present marriage is characterized by devotion and sacrificial love.

**8. If the innocent party in a divorce is seeking remarriage, it is preferable that he/she wait until the spouse has remarried in order to not preclude any possibility of reconciliation.** However, the situation will depend upon a number of factors, i.e., purity of life, time, etc.

+++++

**Note:** This file was written by John MacArthur Jr., of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California. It originally was presented as non-copyrighted material in a booklet titled, "The Biblical Position on Divorce and Remarriage."

For a more detailed study of this subject see, MacArthur, John. *The Divorce Dilemma: God's Last Word on Lasting Commitment*. Leominster, England: Day One, 2009. Print.