

Palmetto Church of Christ

Commitment to the Sanctity of Marriage

September 30, 2012

Marriage is under attack. There is little in the world around us-our culture, the media, and popular attitudes-that values and upholds marriage. These days, divorce is considered a minor issue, not a serious problem. As a result, marriages continue to fall apart and divorce rates are correspondingly high.

As a church, we want to battle against Satan's relentless attack on our families.

A Biblical View of Marriage...

1. Marriage was established by God (Gen. 2; Matt. 19:1-12), and has always been seen as a holy union between a man and a woman with profound spiritual dimensions. Something that matters so much to God should matter to Christians, leading us to take marriage very seriously (Heb. 13:4). The Bible is consistent in urging Christians to keep their marriages together (Mark 10:2-12; 1 Cor. 7: 10-14).
2. When people marry, they make solemn vows before God. Keeping those vows is serious business and breaking them is sin (Eccl. 5:4-7 and Matt. 5:33-37).
3. Marriage is one of God's best tools for teaching us the life he has called us to live selfless, serving, respectful, forgiving, loving (Eph. 5:22-33). Because we are serious about loving Jesus and modeling His love, we are serious about marriage.
4. Marriage, as God intended, is a foundational element of society. The protection of women afforded by marriage, the environment it offers for rearing children, the civilizing and stabilizing influence it exerts, mean that strong marriages are the basis of a strong society. Because we believe that "righteousness exalts a nation" (*Prov. 14:34*), we want our marriages to strengthen our community and our culture.

A Biblical View of Divorce...

1. God hates divorce (Malachi 2: 16). No matter who is "at fault" or the reasons that have led to a marriage relationship disintegrating, God's desire is for reconciliation. He has repeatedly shown the lengths to which He is willing to go to reconcile our unfaithful relationship with Him (Hosea) and did *this* as an example of His unflinching love.
2. When a couple marries, God joins two people together as one. When a couple divorces, they presume to separate what God has joined together (Matt. 19:4-6). Divorce always leaves scars. In Matthew 19:9, Jesus permits divorce in the case of "marital unfaithfulness." Biblical scholars tell us that the word used in the original text refers to sexual immorality. We cannot know what other forms of "marital unfaithfulness" Jesus might *have* had in mind, but we take the offense of adultery very seriously in obedience to his commands.
3. There is often an unintended effect of divorce on other families in the church. If divorce becomes too readily accepted and appears to be a consequence-free solution to marriage problems, more and more couples may be tempted to give up working on their marriages, and divorce can actually become contagious.

Palmetto's commitment to strengthen marriages:

The church has a responsibility to encourage strong marriages-not just by conducting weddings where the right words are said, but through constant teaching, mentoring, counsel, and prayer. As leaders of the Palmetto Church, we pledge to continue to do the following in our ongoing attempt to support your marriage, in addition to any other needs as they arise:

1. We provide a marriage enrichment experience periodically (marriage classes, retreat or seminar) to which all married couples at Palmetto will be invited and encouraged to attend. If finances are tight, we will make scholarships available to you.
2. We ensure that there is periodic preaching and teaching on the subject of godly relationships, so that God's desire for our marriages is frequently reviewed.
3. For those couples anticipating marriage at Palmetto, we strongly encourage you to marry a person of faith. Many problems that we see leading to divorce are when a believer marries an unbeliever and you are commanded to "not be unequally yoked" (II Cor. 6: 14-15). We provide all engaged couples at Palmetto access to premarital literature and counseling to encourage you to build your marriage on a firm foundation. (Matt. 7:24-27)
4. As shepherds, we make ourselves available to you for prayer, counsel, and encouragement. Call us. Let us help you through difficult marital seasons.
5. Younger couples who desire it will be paired with older, more experienced couples for mentoring in the art of strengthening marriage.
6. We will partner with you for marriage counseling, should the need arise. We can refer you to godly counselors who will work hard for the benefit of your marriage. We can help you cover the financial costs associated with counseling, should that be necessary and we will pray for you.
7. If you are experiencing specific issues in your marriage (financial, child rearing, time management, etc.), we will connect you with Palmetto Church members who have specific skills to share and teach.

We care about your marriage and we pledge to do all in our power to encourage a healthy, loving, Christ-like marriage for all at Palmetto. If you will partner with us in this pursuit, we believe God can make this happen.

For those who are struggling in their marriages:

Even in the best of circumstances, it is hard to make a marriage work. And every marriage goes through seasons of struggle and drought. So when you and your spouse find yourselves in such a season, how are you to interact with your church family-the people who love you in the Lord?

1. **Let us walk with you.** We have a stake in your marriage. Because we love you and have entered into covenant relationship with you, because you have a network of friends at Palmetto who will be impacted by your struggle, because others-in the church and in the world-are looking to see whether Christ makes a difference about such matters, your church family expects to walk with you through marital difficulties. At the very least, this will involve praying with you and ensuring that you have godly counsel through a difficult time. Always, this will involve our expectation that you will conduct yourself in a Christ-like way, with a real hunger to do what is right and a readiness to confess and repent.
2. **If you are part of the Palmetto family.** If you are part of the leadership of the Palmetto Church (elder, staff member, teacher, deacon, etc.) or if you lead in public worship in any way and you are encountering serious problems in your marriage, we expect you to talk about it with the elders and participate in a process of restoration and relational healing. We are cautioned against "the blind leading the blind lest they both fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14). If, after personal consideration and the advice of others, it seems advisable to withdraw from leadership for a *season* we would hope you do so voluntarily and willingly-at least until you can again give testimony to God's power to heal.
3. **Confess.** Satan's greatest power to work comes in the shadows created by our attempts to deny, evade or pretend. God's greatest opportunities come when we confess, repent, and seek the help of our Father and our Christian family (James 5: 16; Eph. 5: 11-14). **If you are facing serious marital problems, please ask for help early.** An elder or one of the church staff can be a valuable resource. They will ask you to follow the guidelines presented in this paper.
4. **Lean on us.** Take advantage of every resource Palmetto Church can offer to address your problems and heal your marriage. Whether prayer or counseling or mentoring, please hold us to the pledges we have made to support and encourage your marriage. We take seriously the commandment to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
5. **Persevere.** Remember the solemn vows you made when you got married: "for better or for worse." Failing to honor those vows is a serious matter. Recognize that God uses difficult times in our lives to refine our faith and encourage reliance on Him (I Pet. 1:6-7; I Pet. 5:6) You should make every effort to save your marriage, including professional counseling, patience, and prayer.

Sometimes, though, even our best efforts are not enough. Sometimes the hurt and pain go too deep. Sometimes-even among Christian couples-divorce happens

How does Palmetto respond to divorce?

So what happens if you don't solve your *marital* problems and save your marriage? What does it mean to be a member of Palmetto Church who is divorcing?

Palmetto will try to help the parties save their marriages whenever possible, and if that doesn't happen, they try to help couples deal with the dissolution of their marriage in the most Christian way possible—a way that is always penitent, respectful, compassionate, and forgiving.

For those who are divorcing...

We make the following requests of people who are separating and contemplating divorce.

1. **Repent.** If your marriage still fails, we will mourn with you over that failure. God hates divorce, whatever the reason (Mal. 2:16). You took vows ("till death do us part"); don't gloss over the seriousness of failing to keep your vows (Matt. 19:1-15; Num. 30:2). Do not try to minimize your role or defend yourself or blame everything on your spouse. It is far better to acknowledge your own fault as fully as possible, and to prayerfully and publicly repent of your contributions to the breakdown of your marriage. "God is close to a contrite heart," Scripture makes clear (Psalm 32, Psalm 34, and Psalm 52, for example).
2. **Recognize there will be consequences.** Even though secular wisdom suggests that divorce is often the best option, God constantly warns that there are unavoidable and often permanent consequences of breaking your vows. (Mal. 2:13-15). We encourage you to consider the current and future consequences of your actions on your soul, the soul of your spouse and family and the *effect* on those in your circle of influence (church members, friends, co-workers, extended family and generations who may not yet be born!)
3. **Forgive.** If divorce occurs, you must work for relational reconciliation to the greatest degree possible with your estranged partner (Rom. 12:14-18). You should acknowledge and ask forgiveness for your failures, from God and from the congregation, realizing that human forgiveness is *difficult* and that your former spouse may not be able to forgive you immediately. You should also make it your goal to extend complete forgiveness to your partner.
4. **Be pure.** God provided the sexual relationship to be enjoyed only between a husband and wife (Prov. 5:15-18). If, before or since your separation, you have been sexually involved with another person, you should acknowledge that you have committed the sin of adultery or fornication. No amount of focusing on the failures of your partner will justify this behavior of yours (Matt. 5:27-32). Even if you have not physically committed adultery, but have developed an emotional attachment which kept you from giving your best efforts to your marriage and encouraged you to leave your spouse, that shows a deep failure which calls for deep repentance. Please be clear on this: sex outside of marriage is sin, and cannot be condoned among professing Christians and God will judge this behavior (1 Cor. 6:18-20; Lev. 20:10; Heb. 13:4).
5. **Refrain.** We plead and encourage each couple to attempt to restore their marriage to what God wants it to be. However, if you are separated— even if your spouse is guilty of marital unfaithfulness and it appears that divorce may occur— we strongly urge you not to enter into other relationships during this period. To do so can invite danger and temptation.
6. **Heal.** If there are contributing factors which led to your divorce (addictions, violence, uncontrolled anger, mental or emotional illnesses, lasting *effects* of past traumas) please commit yourself to uncover and deal thoroughly with every deeper issue. It will be hard—but if you don't deal with the underlying issues, in the long run you will suffer far more.

We can make referrals to qualified and caring Christian counselors to help you through this important healing process.

7. **Be open.** Since, as a church, we publicly celebrate marriages, you should expect that we will also, as a church, publicly mourn divorce. We will not ignore or feign ignorance when one of our families comes unraveled. Be aware that, if you divorce, we will address that as honestly and openly as we deem necessary. However, since no two divorces are the same, we commit to responding to each divorce with all the sensitivity and grace that God's Spirit grants us. The purpose of dealing openly with the fact of divorce is not to punish but to restore and heal ... to bring the full resources of the church to bear on broken people and families.
8. **Encourage.** When you speak with others about your divorce, please join us in urging people to build and preserve healthy marriages. Please do not make it easier for others to give up on a marriage because of your influence. Saving a troubled marriage is hard, but few if any divorced people will say that surviving a divorce is, in the long run, an easy thing either. Be a force to strengthen marriages, not weaken them, in the Christian community and beyond.

If, in the opinion of the elders, you have refused to listen to Godly counsel and pursue a course of willful disobedience to God's plan, then we may be called upon to take drastic action (1 Cor. 5).

Palmetto Church's commitment to those who are divorced

We understand that any effort to touch on the subject of marriage and divorce scratches at old scars and resurrects feelings of guilt, anger, and fear. So let us speak a few words directly to the divorced among us. If you are at Palmetto as a divorced person or a divorced couple, we welcome you with open arms and want you to find with us a place to begin again the pursuit of God's purposes for your life. We hope to model God's attitude -- we hate divorce-- but we love *divorced* people. We recognize that "we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" and stand with you as failed people who have been saved by the grace of Jesus.

In fact, just as we commit to support married couples, we commit to support those who are divorced. As leaders of the Palmetto we pledge the following in our ongoing attempt to support Christians who have suffered through the dissolution of their marriages:

1. We are eager to provide divorce support and counsel for those who desire it and for their children. We can refer you to godly counselors. If this involves a financial commitment and money is tight, we will make scholarships available to you. We will try to support you emotionally and we will pray for you as you are in counseling
2. We will ensure that there is periodic preaching and teaching on the subject of emotional, spiritual, and relational healing.
3. As shepherds and staff, we make ourselves available to you for prayer, counsel, and encouragement. Call us. Let us help you through difficult seasons.
4. If you are experiencing specific issues (financial, being a single parent, time management, etc.), we will connect you with Palmetto Church members who have specific skills to share and teach.

We welcome you to worship with us at Palmetto and seek God's will for your life in your current situation. We recognize that God is the only perfect and righteous judge (Psalms 7: 10, 11), but as elders, we feel we are called upon to shepherd God's flock (I Peter 5:1-3 and Titus 1:7-9). Many times we learn from other's mistakes (I Cor. 10:1-11) and we hope that you will be able to encourage others to avoid some of the same struggles and pitfalls that you may have encountered.

Divorce is a tragedy that you can survive, move beyond, and grow through. We at Palmetto want to be part of helping you in that. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. Moral failure, even in marriage, is not necessarily fatal to our walk with the Lord and his people. But like all sin, divorce must be treated seriously, repented of sincerely, and mourned deeply.

Conclusion:

If you are a member of the Palmetto Church and you disagree with these guidelines regarding marriage/divorce, feel free to continue attending here, but understand that protecting our marriages is this important to us. If you are committed to these guidelines, we urge you to benefit from every possible resource here at Palmetto Church-worship, life groups, mentoring opportunities, seminars, retreats, classes, etc. All of us need the support and encouragement, the accountability and comfort of our Christian family, especially as we form, cultivate, and restore marriages that honor God (2 Cor. 1:3-11). To summarize, marriage must be protected and honored. Divorce must be avoided to every extent possible. When divorce occurs, it should be faced prayerfully, courageously, grieved deeply, and learned from thoroughly, so healing can begin.