

MARRIAGE: REMAINING FAITHFUL

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The Bible clearly teaches that marriage is a lifetime commitment requiring complete devotion by husband and wife. Jesus said, “...*What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*” (Mat. 19:6). God expresses his design in marriage by teaching that, “...*he which made them at the beginning made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?*” (Mat. 19:5). The Creator ordained that man and woman dwell together as one in the bonds of marriage. In the book of Hebrews, all “alternative” relationships are identified as sinful and destined to come under God’s judgment (Heb. 13:4).

Someone may say, “I recognize that marriage should be a lifetime commitment, but times have changed and we can’t expect people to stay together if they are not compatible.” However, let us notice the clear teaching of scripture concerning this matter, “...*Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.*” (Mat. 19:9). This principle applies to both husband and wife although it is addressed to the husband as the head of the wife. The teaching here is very clear: if the husband puts away (divorces) his wife and then marries another, adultery has been committed. The only exception to this law is “*except it be for fornication*”, i.e. unfaithfulness on the part

of the one being put away. Fornication is sexual activity with anyone other than the person to whom you are married. In such cases, the party who has been faithful to their vows may divorce the adulterer and, if they choose to do so, marry another without transgressing God’s law.*

The mindset of the world today is not unlike that which Jesus encountered when he was here in human flesh over two thousand years ago. The Pharisees asked Jesus, “...*Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?*” (Mat. 19:3). Jesus’ disciples seemed to think so because, after He stated God’s standard (“*except it be for fornication*”), they said, “*If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.*” (Mat. 19:10). The disciples were basically saying, “If marriage is a lifelong commitment, then it is best not to marry.” Evidently, they were accustomed to living in a culture in which divorce and remarriage were commonly accepted, regardless of the reason for the divorce.

If approximately one in every two marriages ends in divorce, it is reasonable to expect that divorced people will make up a portion of those who request membership in the church. Some of these people will be married couples in which one or both parties, prior to their present marriage, divorced without biblical grounds. In other words, the person they divorced was not guilty of fornication. Therefore, adultery was committed when they entered their present marriage. When such a couple requests church membership, the church may become divided in judgment. The controversy usually centers on a single question: “Since they are still married to the

one with whom they committed adultery, what constitutes repentance from adultery?"

In light of the similar "cultural norms" of New Testament times and twenty first century America, what would Jesus have us to do? Would he want us to receive people in the church who have been divorced and remarried without a biblical basis? If someone committed adultery when they married their present spouse, is it right to give them membership in the church? Moses "suffered" (allowed or tolerated) divorce, even when fornication was not a factor (*Mat. 19:8*). However, Jesus taught that, unless fornication was a factor, to divorce and remarry was to commit adultery (*Mat. 19:9*). How can someone transition from living by what Moses tolerated to living by what Jesus commanded? Suppose someone has divorced and remarried several times thinking that they could get a divorce "for every cause". Now they realize that they committed adultery each time they did this. How do they repent?

Unlike the case of a drunkard who quits drinking alcohol or a thief who stops stealing, genuine repentance may not be as visible and may be questionable when someone is still married to the person with whom they committed adultery. Therefore, the church needs clear direction from God's word when addressing this matter. In the nineteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus was addressing the misconception about divorce (v. 3). The failure to recognize a second marriage as sinful was based upon an incorrect understanding of divorce. The disciples had been living under the practice which Moses "suffered" (tolerated) i.e., divorce for "any cause". Consequently, divorce and remarriage was generally accepted, regardless of the reason for the

divorce. Jesus informed his audience that adultery was being committed each time someone divorced and remarried, unless fornication was a factor in the divorce. Jesus did not draw attention to the ongoing state or condition of the marriage which followed the divorce. He never referenced what is sometimes identified as "living in adultery". He only referred to "committing adultery". He was teaching his followers to stop committing adultery by changing their view of divorce. To repent or turn away from adultery is to stop committing it by ending the "divorce and remarry" lifestyle.

A fear which the church occasionally encounters is identified by a question. "What if someone in the church divorces without scriptural authority, is excluded from the church, remarries, and then, at a later time, feigns repentance in order to have their membership restored?" This fear often comes from the belief that God will punish the church for restoring such a person. However, God will not hold the church accountable for the sin of an individual. He holds the church accountable only if they knowingly tolerate the sin of the individual. God did not rebuke the church at Corinth because a member was a fornicator. He rebuked them because they willfully allowed the fornicator to continue being a member (*1 Cor. 5:2, 6*). God gives the church the responsibility of judging and disciplining her own members (*1 Cor. 5:12, 6:1-5*). However, if someone succeeds in deceiving the church by feigning repentance, God will deal with the individual accordingly because "...all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do." (*Heb. 4:13*). God holds the church accountable for corporate sins, including the sin of inappropriate tolerance of an individual's sin(s). However, he holds

individuals accountable for secret sins and sins of the heart. (2 Cor. 5:10). Oftentimes, the deceiver is later exposed because deception represents an absence of godly fear which will eventually manifest itself in other areas of life (1 Tim. 5:24, 1 Cor. 4:5). At such time the church may discipline him/her, thereby removing the leaven from the body (1 Cor. 5:6).

Those who have never been members of the church are accountable to God in the same way that baptized believers are accountable to God. However, Jesus taught, “*And that servant which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more*” (Luke 12:47-48). Jesus is teaching that the consequences of deliberate sin are greater than the consequences of sin committed in ignorance of God’s law. As members of the church, we are held to a higher level of scrutiny as we are subject, not only to the chastening of the Lord, but also the discipline of the church.

The responsibility and, sometimes, difficulty to identify real repentance is eliminated if the church teaches that one can not repent of adultery as long as they are married to the person with whom they committed it. However, the consequences of this view are much more complex and troublesome. Consider a common scenario. A young man and woman marry while in their early twenties. After a few years of arguing and strife, they get a divorce. A few months later, the man marries again while the

woman is still single. Assuming his first wife has not been a fornicator, he has now committed adultery (Mat. 19:9). He and his second wife begin a family. As the children grow, they begin to see the importance of church. They begin attending church together, are convicted by the message of the gospel and come forward mourning over their sins as they profess their faith in Christ and request baptism. If adultery is a state of sin which continues throughout the second marriage, then the church must not allow this couple to be members, regardless of the testimony they give to the church. To do so would be to allow people to continue in a sinful lifestyle while being members of the church.

When people with a history of divorce and remarriage come to the church, they need to hear the message of repentance and forgiveness. To repent of adultery is to stop committing it by remaining faithful to your present marriage. Jesus told the woman caught in the act of adultery, “... *go and sin no more*” (John 8:11). Confess your sin(s) of adultery to God. Pray with your husband or wife asking God to forgive you for entering into this marriage in violation of His word. Repent of the sin of adultery by resolving to never divorce and remarry again. In your present marriage, be faithful to the vows which you disregarded in your previous marriage. God “...*hateth putting away...*” (Mal. 2:16) but declares that “*Marriage is honourable in all...*” (Heb. 13:4). We should hate what God hates and honor what God honors.

Historically, with regard to divorce and remarriage, it has been the practice of some churches to administer church discipline only if adultery has been committed. However, if two married believers (church

members) cannot reconcile their differences, they are subject to the discipline of the church. If after seeking the help of two or three members according to the procedure of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew and one or both parties have asked for the counsel of the church, or if the couple has separated or divorced;** the church should immediately begin an effort to bring about reconciliation. If one or both of the parties refuse to reconcile, it may be necessary at the appropriate time to withdraw fellowship. The church has the authority and responsibility to determine if the husband, the wife, or both should be disciplined by the church (1 Cor. 5:12). Furthermore, it is at the discretion of the church as to whether they should be allowed to live separate (without remarrying) and remain members of the church. It all depends on the circumstances and, especially, their attitudes. While it may be inappropriate for the entire church to know all the details, they should be familiar enough with the nature of the marital problems so as to make a sound judgment. If the church takes disciplinary action on circumstances alone, it may result in inappropriate or unjust discipline by the church. For example, what if the church withdraws fellowship from the party who left the home, without considering why they left. Perhaps the attitude of the person they left is one of rebellion against the teaching of God's word as it pertains to marriage.

After the church has carried out what they deem to be sufficient labor, there are several scenarios which may result: (1) the couple reconciles their differences; therefore, no more disciplinary action is necessary. (2) The church finds it necessary to withdraw fellowship from both of them, thereby committing the matter to the Lord (1 Cor.

5:13). However, if one or both of them ask to have their membership restored, the church will need to re-evaluate the circumstances and attitudes of the party or parties seeking restoration. (3) The church finds it necessary to withdraw fellowship from one of them. In this case, the one from whom the church has withdrawn is now, categorically speaking, an unbeliever (See Mat. 18:17). At this point, a principle applies which was not applicable as long as both parties in the marriage were members of the church. Paul instructed the Church at Corinth about this matter by writing, "*But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart, a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.*" (1 Cor. 7:15). If the party from whom the church has withdrawn then leaves the marriage (or has already left), the "*brother or sister*" remaining in the church has no further obligation to the marriage. By following the biblical pattern when church members have marriage problems, both parties are held accountable and the marriage problem is not left unresolved.

**It is assumed that the person they marry is someone who has never married, divorced their former husband or wife because of fornication, or lost their husband or wife to death.*

***If the church is aware of their marital problems prior to divorce, they should counsel with them in an effort to bring about reconciliation. If the church ignores the issue until they divorce, reconciliation is much less likely to occur.*