

# Non-Negotiable: God's Law Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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About two years into my preaching career, an older woman who was a member of the church invited me over for breakfast. It was a great feast - she served sausage, biscuits, gravy, along with several other favorite foods. As we talked about life and faith, she looked at me and said, "Wes, I have a problem." Suddenly, I became less concerned about the sausage and more concerned about what her next words were going to be.

She proceeded to tell me that, many years ago, her husband left her and her small children, forcing her to raise a family all by herself. Her husband left her to pursue a new life with his secretary. This was new information to me. I then assumed that her problem was continued depression over this tragic turn of events. Yet, she stopped me to let me know that this terrible situation was not her problem. At first, she struggled with how to handle her loss and the emotions that came along with being deserted, but she had worked through those things and went on to raise a faithful Christian family.

The real problem, she continued, is that her husband (who had run off with his secretary) comes back to town one weekend a year to visit. Not only does he come back to town, but he attends worship and sits two rows in front of her. Her problem was that, when this happens, everybody acts like this is not a big deal. “People hug them and express how glad they are to see them. Everybody acts like that woman is his wife.” This older sister did not harbor hate in her heart or resent his presence in worship. Her problem was that she didn’t know how to respond to everyone in the church who had just accepted this relationship as a marriage.

Because adultery is such a pressing problem, Christians must continue to address the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. **Adultery is a sin, no matter how long people have been committing it, how much you love them, or how uncomfortable the subject makes us.**

The English word *adultery* comes from the Greek work *moichia*. It refers to the sexual violation of a marital relationship. In John 8:4 we read about a woman being brought to Jesus who the accusers said “was caught in adultery, in the very act.” **Adultery is a sin, and those who participate in it will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).** Not only is it a sin, but it is also a sin many have been **fooled** into thinking is not a big deal. But the same passage, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, reminds us to “not be deceived.” **Don’t be deceived by the many voices who want to deny the sinfulness or existence of adultery. Many reputable names in our fellowship, while calling it a “sin,” still deny it by refusing to talk about adultery with any specificity and accept people as married who actually are in adulterous relationships.**

Jesus taught on this subject in Matthew 19 when a group of Pharisees came to Him wanting to know if it was lawful for a man to leave his wife “for any cause” (vs. 3). Today’s no-fault divorce laws allow people to get a divorce “for any cause.” Our culture celebrates divorce, championing the “freedom” to pursue whatever kind of relationship you want. You can now marry anyone of any gender, regardless of God’s word on the matter. Such laws may change a person’s tax status, but **nothing has changed in the eyes of God.**

Jesus then proceeded to tell the Pharisees of God’s intent “from the beginning” for marriage to be a relationship where two people (a man and woman) become *one* and are never separated in this life by man (vs. 4-6). However, Jesus does give one God-authorized reason in this life to divorce and then remarry another. In verse 9 He instructs the listeners, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (NKJV).

**Many people want to explain away those verses because they are hard.** It is unthinkable that the implications of that verse haven't impacted anyone in today's world. Divorce has woven itself into our families and our churches. Jesus' words were hard when He spoke them in the first century, and they are no less hard in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So strict was His teaching that people responded, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (vs. 10). Hard as His words are, we must teach what He taught. **And since the church belongs to Jesus, we don't get to modify these words. They are, in fact, non-negotiable.**

There is a temptation to avoid the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage because it is highly emotional, painfully personal, and can cause a lot of problems when people insist on continuing in relationships that the world has embraced long ago, but God rejects. When I think about how committed we must be to these difficult teachings, I think of John the Baptizer. Jesus said that "among those born of women none is greater than John" (Luke 7:28). John found himself in a situation where he made the choice to speak out against the relationship of some very powerful people, Herod and Herodias. Herodias was actually the wife of Herod's brother, but apparently had found herself in a relationship with Herod. John spoke out against this and said, "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matt. 14:4). Because he spoke out against this relationship, John was thrown into prison and eventually had his head severed from his body and placed on a platter (Matt. 14:3-10). Adultery is not a new practice, and neither is the visceral response that many have to it being exposed. I have often wondered how things might have been different if John had just kept his mouth shut, but he did not. **He considered the subject of divorce and remarriage to be non-negotiable.**

We cannot afford to be in the shadows on this topic. Of all people, Christians need to be outspoken about abusive relationships. We should be outspoken about building great marriages that reflect Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:32). We should be outspoken about the God-given rights of those who have put away their spouse because of sexual immorality. We should also be outspoken against the sin of adultery. Even if the whole world (and, unfortunately, many sitting next to us in the pews) says it is no big deal, adultery is still a big deal to God and will keep one out of heaven.

I know that in tackling an issue like this, there are so many things left unsaid and unanswered. There is a place to address some of the intricacies of the subject, but we must never forget that the words of Jesus are our baseline. **The last will and testament of Jesus trumps you, me, your preacher, my situation, or wherever else we may want to turn.** The problem of adultery is not new, and it is not going away. But if we are to minimize the terrible effects of adultery for future generations, we must address the subject now without apology. As children of light, darkness must be exposed for what it is (Eph. 5:8).

How would you have responded to that older lady? Would you have told her to “get over her problem”? Would you have told her to get on with the times and stop living in the past? I told her that she was right to be disturbed. I told her that the congregation must do a better job of speaking out against the sin of adultery, especially as it becomes more accepted in society and even among self-identifying Christians. Failure to address this problem is a failure to preach the “whole counsel” of God (Acts 20:27). Because Jesus has spoken, we must not shrink back from speaking. We cannot “pick and choose” which of Jesus’ words we are going to embrace.