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VOL. XXX
NO. 47
November 22, 2015

Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

A Discussion With Myself On Divorce, Remarriage And Repentance

In my mind, the most nerve-wracking doctrine in the Bible is God’s teaching regarding remarriage.

I have no problem facing down two twenty-somethings who are shackled up together, informing them that they are committing sin (1 Cor. 6:9–11, Heb. 13:4), and demanding they move out or get married.

I have no problem telling two married people who are quarreling that divorce is not an option (1 Cor. 7:10–11, Matt. 19:6), and that they need to fix their relationship.

In fact, I have no problem telling a person who has dumped his wife and run off with his secretary that he is committing a grievous sin, has no right to marry her, and should return to his spouse immediately (if she’ll have him back), or else remain single (Mal. 2:14–16, Matt. 5:32).

No, the situation I detest is preaching the gospel to a happily married couple, often with young children, watching the word take hold and begin to do its

beautiful work, watching them progress toward following Jesus, only to discover that they are on their second marriage. Then, I must teach God's word on remarriage, and help the couple determine whether or not they should be with one another.

I cringe and point out Matthew 19:9, in which Jesus says,

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman, commits adultery.

As well as Matthew 5:32, in which Jesus says,

But I say to you, that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

It seems that those who have committed this sin must separate if they mean to repent of it. That's harsh. And I can't afford to get it wrong. This is not one of those doctrines that I can leave to personal judgment. If I tell the couple it's OK to stay together and I'm wrong, they are committing adultery and I have given them false hope (Matt. 15:14). If I tell the couple they must separate and I'm wrong, I have likely driven them away from God's grace and salvation (Matt. 18:6, 23:13). But it's not easy to be sure. Very intelligent and honest Christians view this differently, and it has become a divisive controversy.

My first instinct, as a person who doesn't like nasty confrontation, is to find a way to interpret Matthew 19:9 to avoid the conclusion that a happily married couple would have to separate. Maybe what Jesus condemns here is the *act* of remarriage, the moment in time when the new vow was pronounced, not the subsequent relationship. **Two wrongs don't make a right. We should not compound one wrong with another, should we?** Thus, the couple should now, from this moment forward, be faithful to whatever vows they are currently under.

I like that. It makes sense to me. But, it's not what Jesus says. Jesus says that if a man remarries he commits "adultery." Adultery is a sin

where marriage exists—either a married person has someone outside his own marriage, or a person has someone who is married (or both). While I've read piles of books on this subject, I am always brought back to this one simple fact: Jesus *defines* a second marriage as adultery. The only way to make sense of this is that God views the first marriage as in force. He wouldn't call it adultery any other way. "What God has joined together let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6). A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery because God still views him as married to his first wife. United States law says "he who divorces his wife and marries another woman is fine." Clearly, what is acceptable in the eyes of the state, and what is prevalent in our society, is not necessarily acceptable in the eyes of God.

These days, about 40–60% of the people I study with are married to someone other than their first spouse. I've heard of preachers who quit preaching because they could not stomach this awful, sad, sometimes angry confrontation. I want nothing more than to whitewash over the subject. But, then I realize that the instinct to speak softly on this subject is a temptation to speak less than God's word. I have to remember that preachers are not called to speak their minds, but to speak God's word; and all of God's word (Acts 20:27).

I almost feel myself getting angry at God that He would put me in this uncomfortable position! But then I remember that God is not to blame, but rather Satan, who has darkened the minds of our society. Less than a century ago, everyone knew and accepted that people married "for better or worse" and rarely divorced. This would not have been a difficult doctrine then. Society has changed; not God.

But again I back down. I could impose this if the people knew what God's word said about it and plunged ahead anyway. **But what about a couple who didn't know? God can't possibly hold them responsible, can He?**

But when I really stop and think about it, yes He can. It does not matter if the marriage was entered before or after one became a Christian. God does not have one set of rules for Christians and one set

of rules for non-Christians. All shall be judged by His eternal word (John 12:48). It is “upon these things” the wrath of God comes, whether or not one happened to read God’s word.

Besides, it seems to me that if we decide that a non-Christian gets a pass, we must also state that a wayward Christian gets a pass. If God is willing to exempt an unbeliever, He is willing to exempt a wayward believer. God is a God of second chances, and God’s forgiveness is available to all on the same basis—repentance and the blood of Jesus. It’s just that God is not a God of letting people continue in a situation that He has defined as sin.

But again I back down. **For if they get baptized, the baptism will wash away their sin, won’t it? Then, they can continue in their relationship now sanctified, can’t they?**

Then I realize, that notion is a misunderstanding of baptism, which changes the nature of the sinner, but does not change the nature of the sin. Since Jesus defines the relationship as adultery, the newly-baptized couple would plunge back into sin as soon as they returned home.

Let me illustrate: our nation now solemnizes homosexual unions, and permits homosexual couples to adopt. If such a couple learned the gospel, and wanted to be saved, what would God require for repentance? Would baptism erase the sinful nature of their marriage, permitting them to remain in it? Certainly not. Would the church be correct to admonish them to separate, regardless of what the courts had recognized? Absolutely. And this would be true even if the couple and the church loved the adopted children who were involved.

But again I back down. How could Jesus possibly demand that two happily married people split up in order to be right with God and go to heaven? **I can imagine Jesus Christ sitting across the table with those same people, saying in His compassionate and gracious way, “Go your way; sin no more” (John 8:11), can’t you?**

There’s no question Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and was patient with the sinner, and died for all mankind. But I cannot escape the fact that Jesus also requires repentance.

Repentance is defined as a change of heart and a change of will, the determination to turn away from sin and participate in it no longer. Salvation is more than repentance, but it is not less. John said, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). Jesus said, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Peter, “repent, and let each of you be baptized” (Acts 2:38). Paul, “repent and return to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20).

But again I back down. For repentance is one thing. When I’ve buried stolen gold in my backyard, I should dig it up and return it if I truly repent. Baptism did not change the nature of the stolen gold, and I cannot now freely spend the newly-sanctified cash. I need to face the music and deal with my sin if I truly repent. I get that (and I think of the comments of Zaccheus, too; Luke 19:5–9). But not everything can be undone. Breaking up a solid marriage is a whole different thing. **It’s difficult to imagine that Jesus would make the ridiculous demand that two happily married people split up in order to go to heaven, isn’t it? If there were only an example of such, it would be easier to swallow.**

Actually, there are two examples. God’s word offers two occasions in which He demands a happily married couple separate. The first is in Ezra 10:1–4. The situation is different; that is, the law which the people had transgressed was against marrying foreign wives rather than already-married wives. But the solution is instructive. “Let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives...” It must have been just as difficult then as now, perhaps more so.

The second example is found in Mark 6. John the Baptist boldly declared to Herod that he ought not be married to Herodias, for she was already the wife of Herod’s brother Philip.

Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death... (Mark 6:17–19).

John advised Herod to separate from Herodias. Some would say this was due to incest, and others would say this was due to her previous marriage. Either way, it's the solution that is instructive to me. John eventually was murdered for demanding that Herodias leave.

Apparently, it is within the gracious nature of our merciful God to require people who should not be with their spouses to separate.

Still I wonder about some of the situations that I encounter. I confess that I have to throw up my hands when someone says, for example, "What if I kicked out my husband, but stayed single, and then he started dating again, so actually he was committing adultery, so when I started dating a few months later, it was OK, and..." I wish Paul had said more. I wish 1 Corinthians 7 contained five-thousand verses, and that he gave instruction on all the various permutations of this controversy. **Since we don't have God's instruction on all these situations, that means it's OK to let them stand, doesn't it?**

But here's the thing—God's inspired word provides us all the information we need to make decisions in any age. God's silence is often as instructive as His speech. We must possess, within the pages of the New Testament, all the information we need in order to apply God's will regarding marriage to our lives. It's simpler, not more complicated.

When the Pharisees tried to drag Jesus into a convoluted rabbinical discussion of circumstances leading to divorce, Jesus answered very simply by quoting Genesis 2, "the two shall become one flesh ... what therefore God has joined together let no man separate" (Matt. 19:5–6). Jesus' plan for marriage is "one man, one woman, for life" and that should be our aim. The only exception to that is one suffering the indignity of adultery (Matt. 19:9).

Anything beyond these clear cut matters starts to get into territory that I am less and less comfortable attempting to sort out. It may very well be that there are some who must remain unmarried for the rest of their lives in order to be acceptable to God and go to heaven. I don't presume to know what that feels like; I am thankful that I learned God's will regarding marriage before I got married. Jesus concluded His teaching,

“there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (19:12). I often feel inadequate to say when that is the case, and so I feel better to err on the side of caution. I am reminded that the disciples had a horrified reaction to Jesus’ teaching, saying, “if the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” Whatever Jesus was saying, the disciples felt that it was inflexibly strict.

I have one more hang up. It has been pointed out, and it is certainly true, **that any congregation preaching these distasteful truths will lose people, won’t it? Many will leave, and many others will refuse to obey the gospel.** Few will not be able to stand the discomfort caused among families. People will seek other places that teach a less inflexible doctrine.

But let not the church be discouraged. We have been warned that there are false prophets, and that people who want to bend the truth to suit their ways will always seek them out to have their “ears tickled” (2 Tim. 4:1–4). What do we think? Since when has the true preaching of the gospel ever been less than bitterly divisive, and deeply upsetting? This is true in the context of communities (Matt. 10:14) and in the context of families (Matt. 10:34–38). The good news can sometimes feel like a “burden” to share (Hab. 1:1).

Take courage! The gospel is still good news! Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–42), and the woman caught in the very act of adultery (John 8:1–11), prove that those involved in unions Jesus defines as adultery are very much loved by God. They deserve a chance to hear the truth and repent and be saved. Jesus did not say to Himself, when He discovered the Samaritan woman was on her fifth husband, “oh well, she’ll never listen, I won’t even try speaking of the kingdom of God.” He spoke, and she was convinced. Giving up one’s spouse and living a celibate life may seem drastic, but “there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:12). Leave it up to people and God to decide what great sacrifices they will make to obtain eternal salvation. —*J. Guzzetta*