

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE THE PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

By Alton Maxwell

As I have come to view it, this is not simply a disagreement between Christian brothers about an issue in which the difference does not really matter, one way or the other. It is much more important than that. I regard this as a LIFE AND DEATH ISSUE which affects our eternal welfare. It is a life and death issue about whether we submit to Jesus as Lord and DO WHAT HE SAYS. ([Luke 6:46](#))

It is a life and death issue about hardness of heart and the sin of adultery which excludes those who continue in it from the Kingdom of God. ([1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#)) It is a life and death issue about whether or not some of us strengthen the hand of sinners, instead of naming the sin for what it is. It is a life and death issue about whether, with broken spirits and contrite hearts, repentant adulterers find the faith to turn from their sin, *whatever the personal cost may be*.

I write this prayerfully, in the deep conviction that for all of us who teach others, this is a life and death issue about whether we might be causing simpler children in the faith to stumble, thus earning ourselves the proverbial millstone around our necks, and places in the deepest part of the sea. ([Matthew 18:6](#))

If it is really true that remarried divorcees are living in adultery, and if it is also true that adulterers cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, ([1 Corinthians 6:9-19](#)), the consequences for those involved are fearful in the extreme.

What do we do with church members, or potential church members, who by Jesus' definition, are clearly living in adultery?

This is where it gets hard ... too hard for most of the church today. and I confess that I do not find this easy at all.

It is all much easier to discuss in a theoretical Bible study than to put into practice with real live people.

For me, what was once mere theory has become a deeply personal experience. It has become an extremely painful question about the eternal fate of some who once were friends and some who are beloved family.

It affects my relationship with them at least for now and perhaps for ever.

The answer to our question would be much easier, if the partners to adultery were simply living in a de-facto relationship, both still legally married to other parties.

Our answer would be easier still, if one or both of their spouses actively desired reconciliation!

In such cases the very least that we would require of them would be a repentance which ended the adulterous relationship.

Even if the adulterous relationship had produced children, our answer would not change.

Why should our answer be any different, simply because the parties to adultery have a piece of paper from the government, formally "legalising" what Jesus calls sin?

Do people ever come to repentance, when the cost in human terms is so high?

It is of course, next to impossible to persuade a happily "married" couple to forsake a forbidden marriage. Such a "hard line" will certainly prevent most people from joining or staying with the church.

If it were not for the example of those men of Ezra's time, who paid such a high price to restore themselves to obedience, ([Ezra 10:44](#)), we would doubt whether it would ever be possible today.

However, their faith is certainly evidence that there can be Biblical warrant for separation of a marriage which has not been joined by God. If faith in God made it possible then, faith will make it just as possible today for those who do truly love Jesus. ([John 14:15](#) & [John 14:23-24](#))

When a marriage has taken place it is sometimes suggested that repentance is satisfied by a verbal admission of guilt, which then allows the parties to continue in their relationship without it being adulterous any longer. However, this is a very inadequate "repentance".

In no other case does repentance from sin allow the sinner to continue with the deed!

Repentance is a mental condition and a state of heart. It is also a recognition that we cannot continue to do the thing of which we repent. The sin of "adultery by remarriage" will surely require the same "*deeds worthy of repentance*" ([Acts 26:20](#)), as any other form of adultery (or any other sin).

The case is no different to that of say, a bank robber. Can a thief repent and then continue to live off the proceeds of his theft?

Perhaps he has bought a house with the proceeds. Can he keep the house?

Perhaps he has a wife and children. Perhaps he has no other means of support. Perhaps restitution will expose his crime to the authorities, and he may even go to prison as a result, leaving his wife and family destitute, without a husband or father.

Can any of these things alter the nature of the works which are worthy of repentance? Must he not "count the cost" and choose Jesus before wife, children, house, lands, possessions, reputation and all else?

In response to this hard (but not hard hearted!) teaching about divorce and remarriage, the disciples began to question the wisdom of marrying at all! ([Matthew 19:10-12](#))

Jesus was uncompromising.

Yes, indeed, there are some who are called to a life of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Few can receive it, but clearly, one application of this difficult teaching refers to those who must choose to remain separated and single after a marriage break up.

Equally it applies to those who must choose to forsake a "legal" marriage which Jesus plainly calls adulterous.

No repentance is easy when the sin appeals to our deepest human instincts.

It will certainly not be easy for those caught up in the emotional snare of an adulterous "marriage".

However, the Gospel does offer encouragement that obedience will never be TOO hard for any who really do believe that Jesus is the Son of God; whose love and faith is of that life changing quality found at the cross; and whose desire is to overcome the world until they find purity of heart which will enable them, one day, to see God. ([1 John 3:3, 1 John 5:1-5](#))

These hard choices on the part of those involved in divorce and remarriage, are certainly encompassed in what Jesus meant when he called his disciples to be prepared to forsake all, for the sake of his name and the Gospel.

Even when there is no sin involved, there are other ways in which the cost of discipleship can mean choosing Jesus above a wife and children. ([Luke 14:26, Luke 14:33](#))

How much more then, will that choice be necessary in the case of a forbidden marriage where the Gospel call to repentance requires the same response as was made by those Jews in Ezra's day. ([Ezra 10:19](#))

THE PERSONAL IMPLICATIONS

Inevitably in a world where divorce is so common, it is almost inevitable that most of us will experience the deep anguish of standing helpless while the marriages of friends fall apart. And we will experience even more anguish when some of those we love, succumb to the temptations arising from loneliness.

We will be confronted with temptation to breach our consciences to offer them a false peace, by finding somehow, a way to say that a new marriage can become acceptable before God.

Can we rise to the challenge? Can we find the words to explain to them the fearful cost of their actions?

There will be a need to speak of the great barrier erected between them and God, and between them and us, by their persistence in sin.

And we will face the near impossible choice, that even in the case of a beloved son or daughter, GOD MUST COME FIRST. Can we lay our own child on the altar of God, just as surely as Abraham did Isaac?

For Abraham it must have been just about the hardest choice he had ever made. It won't be any less for us. And it will continue to be a hard choice, to be renewed daily.

But, realistically, is there any other choice possible? Dare we settle for less than God's answer? Our inflexible opposition to the relationship, our unwavering loyalty to Jesus, and our unshakeable faith in his teaching may one day be the lifeline to which they cling to find their way back.

The Scriptures indicate some limits to continuing association and friendship. There will be some hard choices.

First, there is the question of continued Church Fellowship. In my personal experience that has seldom been a problem. Most cases I have known simply left our church fellowship voluntarily, without the need for our formal decision to send them away. They knew, and we all knew, that their actions had excluded them from fellowship, and that they could not return without a radical repentance.

There will of course be some other obvious unpleasant social implications, which arise from our inability to recognise their new relationship.

If you ask me for a "law" about precisely where those boundaries lie, I don't have many clear answers. And I am totally unwilling to invent the necessary "straw man" cases which might be used to create a set of rules. My only personal "rule" is that the door must always open for any contact and help, that does not give the appearance of condoning what they are doing.

However, there are some things that are obvious.

Could a Pastor conduct a Wedding Service in situations which Jesus labels as "adultery"? Could a parent give their "blessing" to such a union? Could they even attend the wedding service?

I am just so glad that I don't live in Moses' day, when the daughters of priests were burnt for sexual sin, and adulterers were stoned to death. I would certainly fail in that test. I could never do that to anyone.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line goal of all pastoral and personal dealings with those involved in sinful human relationships, is to be able to faithfully speak the words that may turn them from the error of their ways, save their souls from death, and cover their multitude of sins.

[\(James 5:19-20\)](#)

It is my unshakeable conviction that Jesus meant to say, clearly and unmistakably, that apart from one cause alone, remarried divorcees are living in adultery. It is also very clear that, without a real and costly repentance, adulterers cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.

[\(1 Corinthians 6:9-10\)](#)

This has become a personal grief for the LIFE AND DEATH ISSUES of hardness of heart and the sin of adultery, in which some who were once close friends, and some who are beloved family, have become involved.

This has become a personal LIFE AND DEATH ISSUE about whether some of those I love, will ever again find the grace to submit to Jesus as Lord, and DO WHAT HE SAYS.

[\(Luke 6:46\)](#)

It is a personal LIFE AND DEATH ISSUE about whether or not I will choose to strengthen the hand of sinners, or instead, love them enough to name the sin for what it is.

It is a LIFE AND DEATH ISSUE about whether, with broken spirits and contrite hearts, those who I love very deeply, will ever find the faith to turn from their sin, *whatever the personal cost may be.*

The bottom line must remain with Jesus.

Except for that one cause of unchastity, there is no possible ground for men to separate what God has joined.

If divorce results from any other cause, there is no licence from Jesus for remarriage, (and there are no innocent party exceptions).

Anyone divorced for any of those other causes, who marries again while the first partner is still living, commits adultery.

**Do not be deceived.
Adulterers cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.
God will judge the immoral and adulterous.**

[\(Galatians 5:21 & Hebrews 13:4\)](#)

The pastoral and personal implications of that are almost too fearful to contemplate.

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