

Must Adulterers Separate?

A while back I received a call related to an article entitled “Divorce And Remarriage” which simply laid out the straightforward principles of Matthew 19:9. The discussion revealed the fact that more teaching is needed regarding what must one do when in an adulterous relationship. The caller made a very emotional argument by stating that his first wife was bad but now he was married to a godly woman and God could not possibly want him to leave her to correct an adulterous relationship. Is this correct? Let me emphasize that the purpose of the following instruction is not to be cruel or uncaring. It is for seriously considering the requirements of repentance and urging people to follow them.

The real point in question is what repentance demands. Forgiveness of sin is conditioned upon repentance. It is required for the sinner (Acts 2:38; 17:30-31) and the erring child of God (Acts 8:22). A very simplistic definition of repentance is a change of mind. However, repentance involves (or at least produces) a change in life: ceasing the past sin! The Greek word translated “repentance” means “to change one’s mind for the better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins.” John preached, “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matthew 3:8). Repentance has fruits. Compare Matthew 12:41 and Jonah 3:10. What Matthew 12:41 calls repentance, Jonah 3:10 describes as turning from evil. Though it uses a different Greek word, Matthew 21:28-29 demonstrates that repentance involves a change of mind and a change of action; for the son, whose refused to work, repented and “went.”

The point is that the act of sin must cease! This is true of any sin, whether it be the sin of idolatry or the sin of adultery. If one does not stop or cease the sin, then there has been no repentance (Revelation 9:20-21; 2 Corinthians 12:20-21).

Some might object and say, “God has forgiven me of my adultery and therefore I do not need to divorce my husband or wife.” The word in the Greek translated “committeth adultery” (Matthew 19:9) is in the present tense which denotes continuous action. The adultery is committed as long as the couple cohabits. For a parallel consider the word “believeth” (John 11:26) which is also present tense. Does it refer to the initial act of faith or a progressive faith? Colossians 3:5-7 clearly shows that one can live, exist, or abide in a state or condition of adultery. Verse 5 enumerates some sins which must be put to death. Among them is the sin of fornication. Then, verse 7 says that the Colossians had one time “lived in them.” Romans 7:2-3 shows that a woman would be an adulteress as long as her first husband lives. Without question, people can and do live in adultery.

There is no doubt that this is a highly-charged, emotional subject. When Ezra commanded the men of Israel to put away their foreign wives (Ezra 10:10-11), I am certain it was an emotional difficulty for them. However, it is what God demanded of them to be righteous in His sight. The same is true of the situations concerning divorce and remarriage which are so prevalent now.

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