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Are people who remarry in danger of committing perpetual adultery?

Scripture: Matthew 5:31–32, Deuteronomy 24:2–4, Mark 10:11–12

Code: QA518

What is the status of a Christian who divorces without biblical grounds and remarries? Is he living in perpetual adultery? What about the concept of forgiveness? If someone has remarried unbiblically and seek forgiveness, is he forgiven?

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus says, “It has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

Jesus is saying that the *act of remarriage* is an act of adultery. He is not teaching that the ongoing conjugal relationship with the new spouse is a state of “perpetual adultery”—as if God refused to recognize the remarriage as legitimate in any sense.

If that were the case—if the ongoing physical relationship between the remarried couple constituted one long, continuous, adulterous affair—the proper remedy, and the only way to end the chain of adultery, would be to dissolve the second marriage and insist that everyone return to his or her original spouse. On the contrary, Scripture teaches that the new marriage is now binding. In order to avoid further acts of adultery, the remarried person needs to remain faithful to the new spouse.

As a matter of fact, in the same passage where Moses permitted husbands to issue a certificate of divorce, the law added this restriction: “When she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man’s wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then *her former husband who divorced her must not take her back* to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD” (Deuteronomy 24:2-4, emphasis added).

Clearly, the second marriage—whether biblically justified or not—becomes as binding as the original marriage was supposed to be. A return to the original spouse is strictly forbidden.

So Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:32 (and Mark 10:11-12) mean simply that entering into an illegitimate remarriage is an adulterous act. Nevertheless, once that new marriage covenant is sealed, the remarried couple needs to remain married and be faithful to one another. Their on going physical relationship is not to be thought of as “perpetual adultery.”

On the other hand, as long as they remain unrepentant about the illegitimate remarriage, they cannot expect God’s blessing on their marriage. Like all sins, that unauthorized remarriage must be confessed and repented of.

Because marriage entails a covenant that God deems holy, any remarriage (even remarriage after an unbiblical divorce) cannot be—and should not be—forsaken as we would forsake virtually any other sin. But people who have entered into such a relationship do need to seek God’s forgiveness with sincere repentance.

And yes, God does grant forgiveness for such sins to those who seek His pardon in Christ.

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