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The Plain Truth about Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage

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There is a trend towards softening the gospel message. As society and the religious world moves in a more liberal direction, we too are affected. In that effort to be more tolerant, some have made the gospel message more palatable by "smoothing it out" in various ways.

What the Bible says about marriage, divorce and remarriage has not been exempt from this approach. A softened or smoother version of what the Lord taught on this subject would obviously be more acceptable to the masses. This is not to say that those who teach some of the ideas discussed below have that as their motive.

1. *The text.* Jesus said, "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:9). Though other passages address the subject, this one well summarizes what the Bible teaches on divorce and remarriage.

2. *What does the text say about divorce?* When Jesus was asked whether a man could divorce his wife for any reason (Matt. 19:3), he answered no. Though he didn't give a "yes" or "no" reply, the reasons he cited point to that conclusion (vv. 4-6). The only reason for divorce given by the Lord is "fornication" (v. 9; cf. Matt. 5:32). Divorce for any other cause is without biblical authority.

3. *What does the text say about remarriage?* Jesus said that the man who puts away his wife (for a cause other than

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fornication) and marries another commits adultery. In that same text Jesus said that a man who puts away his wife (for fornication) and marries another does not commit adultery. In the second clause of our text Jesus said that the one who is put away commits adultery when he remarries.

4. *What does that demand?* If we teach what Jesus taught in Matt. 19:9, our message will not always be "smooth" to the ears of our listeners. Those who divorce for causes other than fornication will be pricked by what Jesus said. Those who remarry contrary to what Jesus authorized will be disturbed. Those living in adultery must cease their sin of adultery (separate from an unlawful mate) to conform to what Jesus said (cf. Mark 6:17-18). That would be anything but easy (cf. Ezra 10:9-10, 44). The Lord's message is not a soft and smooth gospel.

How Are Men Speaking Smooth Things About Divorce And Remarriage?

1. *Not teaching on divorce and remarriage at all.* Those who just avoid the subject, whether it be because they think it to be too controversial or because they are afraid of the consequences, have softened the gospel message by leaving that part out. Some men, because their position differs from many in the congregation, will agree not to teach on divorce and remarriage. While they may not be teaching error, they are not teaching the truth. The whole counsel is not being preached (Acts 20:27). At least part of the word is not being preached (2 Tim. 4:1-2). Those who sit at the feet of such men may never hear the truth about divorce and remarriage.

2. *Encouraging divorce for any cause.* The permanence of marriage that the Bible teaches is not popular. When some brother encourages divorce (teaches that it is scriptural) for causes other than fornication (as long as one does not remarry), he makes the message more acceptable to those who do not respect the fact that marriage is for life. That is a smoother message for the couple that fuss and fight all the time and want out of their marriage. God's law does not authorize it.

3. *Teaching that the guilty party can remarry.* The Lord's instructions (Matt. 19:9) allow one to put his mate away for

fornication and remarry. Some brethren teach that the one who has been put away for fornication ("guilty party") can also scripturally remarry. That is a smooth message to the ears for the guilty party, because Jesus never authorized it. In fact, Jesus said, "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:9b).
 4. *Allowing some put away people to remarry.* Some argue that the one who has been put away (for a cause other than fornication) can remarry if their former mate remarries first. Others argue that if one is put away by a mate who has committed fornication, he can remarry. Neither of these are authorized by the Lord. In contrast, Jesus said, "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matt. 19:9b; 5:32b; Luke 16:18).

5. *Telling the alien sinner he is not amenable to the law of Christ.* Even though the gospel (the law of Christ) is for all nations (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15) and Jesus applied his teaching to "whosoever" (Matt. 19:9), we are told by some brethren that Christ's law on marriage only applies to Christians who are married. Thus, non-Christians are neither governed nor judged by what Jesus taught. If one divorces (for whatever cause) and remarries he can continue with the mate he has when he obeys the gospel. He becomes amenable to the law of Christ when he is a Christian. That is a far more convenient message than what the Lord presented in Matt. 19:9.

6. *Redefining adultery.* When men are allowed to redefine adultery to mean "covenant breaking" (the unscriptural divorce and remarriage) and not the unlawful sexual activity with the second mate, the message of Christ is so much smoother to the ears of those in second or third marriages. That means that if they repent of breaking the covenant with their first mates and determine not to do it again, they can stay together. No lexicon or passage justifies this arbitrary definition of adultery (cf. the use of the term in Matt. 5:28; John 8:4).

7. *Speaking of the ambiguity of Matt. 19:9.* Some have spoken of the ambiguity of Matt. 19:9. I understand their point to be that they are unsure if this text is even authorizing remarriage when divorce is for the cause of fornication. They are quick to suggest that their point is even more "conservative" than what I and others teach on Matt. 19:9. However,

my concern about such discussion is that if we convince our hearers that there is ambiguity with Matt. 19:9, they may conclude that we cannot be certain that one who puts away his mate (for some cause other than fornication) and remarries commits adultery. Since we can't be certain what Jesus was really saying, we would need to tolerate a diversity of doctrines on divorce and remarriage.

Let us be content with what Jesus taught. Let us preach it as it is revealed.