

Is Divorce & Remarriage an Unforgivable Sin?

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A Personal Note

There have been sets of circumstances in my own life that have prompted me to write these notes. They are the results of my own personal struggles, tears, observation, reflection, prayer and study. I also have seen many believers and their families helplessly struggling through the muddy waters that the sin of man has produced in relation to married life. Numerous problems related to divorce and remarriage have permeated our society, community and churches. So many innocent people also are adversely affected by the brutal realities of life. Many do not know how to face these tough situations and there is no “quick fix” to this problem. **Those who are suffering in this area are not usually ministered to and cared for in our assemblies.** They are a neglected group, treated as lepers, always kept “outside the camp.” Whatever be the causes and reasons for their marital problems, whether they are innocent or guilty, right or wrong, victims or culprits, they are written off; no second chance; no redemptive approach, no ministry towards them. Books, articles, preaching, teachings, actions, and attitudes are all against them; **usually of sheer condemnation without any trace of compassion** (if you have seen anything different, it is by accident, or it is just a rare exception).

I do not intend to write about the doctrine of marriage, divorce and remarriage. Enough has been written about it. This is **NOT** a study on those topics or a defense of any interpretive position. I think all of us agree on the basic biblical principles of marriage as God originally instituted it. For centuries, Bible scholars and expositors have wrestled with the many interpretive problems related to the question of divorce and remarriage. Even among conservative, evangelicals who uphold the total inerrancy and authority of the Word of God, there are differing views on this. This is true even among the Brethren writers and teachers. So there is no need for anyone to claim **a monopoly of truth or unnecessarily dogmatize** certain position, though each one of us may graciously hold on to our interpretation and conviction to the best of our knowledge, and live by it.

My Concern and the Issue at Hand

What I am concerned about and the lament here is the **ungracious attitude and even teaching** by many believers and teachers/preachers among us that divorce and remarriage is the **greatest sin, an unforgivable sin, or a sin unto death** (it may not be exactly stated like this, but their teaching and approach to this issue amounts to these extremes) and such people have no spiritual status whatsoever; they should be kept at a safe distance, they are second class Christians, and assembly halls should close their doors for them, and we must not associate with them. These “fallen” people are forever frozen in a sin state without any possibility of forgiveness. The gist of this condemnatory teaching is that God has given up on them and there is no hope for them. Hence, **we do not have any ministry towards them.** Some may not explicitly

teach or say this openly, but it is clearly manifested through their attitudes, actions, policies, practices, comments, and opinions (this is the general trend, there can be some rare exceptions). They also take pride in such orthodoxy!

But it is ironic and so puzzling that in spite of all our “pure doctrines” and claim for “monopoly of truth” many assembly halls are already closed in different parts of the world, and many are barely surviving, and many of the young generation among them have already left them! The assemblies generally are in a state of decline. I do not know whether we ever think realistically and seriously about the reasons for this rapid decline of assemblies and why many spiritually minded young people in our midst are frustrated and disillusioned with the assemblies. Since it is an unpleasant truth, nobody wants to talk about it! We feel compelled to maintain the status quo and avoid such challenging and humbling realities.

This is not about condoning sin. **The question of how God’s grace and forgiveness affect this issue is never considered preached, taught or discussed among us.** Many preachers and teachers do not want to even think about it. Those who may want to say something about it, shy away from it because of the fear of man. Platforms, pulpits and popularity is their primary concern. Even those who preach on *grace* and *forgiveness* never tie it with any situation related to divorce or remarriage. This trend is very common in assembly circles. **There is even reluctance to pray** for such struggling people and their families or even to let them know that we sympathize with their struggles. Unbelievable! But it is true! It is happening right before our eyes every day! It is really alarming!

Is This a Christian Attitude?

I believe this approach is totally **unchristian**, selfish, legalistic, pharisaic, and has nothing to do with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The damage and the destruction that has been done by the proponents and promoters of this aberrant theology is indescribable. Many lives have been shattered as a result of it. Several families have been driven away from our midst. If a divorce/remarriage has happened in a family, some assemblies even take action against the parents and even excommunicate them also. In some cases, debar them from fellowship, try to make their life miserable and finally drive them off from the assembly. They try to spiritually choke innocent believers and take pride in these “so-called scriptural measures”! One wonders, whether this condemning attitude and actions may qualify to be called *unpardonable sin*!

I know my words may be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. So let me clarify. **I am NOT advocating a compromising attitude to divorce or remarriage. I am NOT suggesting an endorsement or promotion of it, or for you to close your eyes to the sins of others. NO, NOT AT ALL. Every assembly is entitled to their practices and policies. Every Christian is entitled to his convictions. BUT IF WE HAVE ONLY “TRUTH” AND NO “GRACE,” THEN WE ARE ANOTHER BRAND OF RELIGION; NOT CHRISTIAN. *This ungracious and condemning attitude and practice is the issue I am addressing here.***

I have seen this ungracious, non-compassionate, hard-hearted, and legalistic attitude all through my life and how it has adversely affected many lives. Many young believers in our midst are concerned about it. This is a sincere lament from the bottom of my heart. It may end up as a “cry in the wilderness;” it doesn’t matter. These notes are a weak, but sincere endeavor to call attention to a very urgent matter *totally ignored and neglected* in our midst. Many who know what I am writing is true, may not even want to publicly admit it for fear of isolation.

An Irony and a Contradiction

Though we are vehemently opposed to marriage break ups, divorce, and remarriage, **we readily tolerate** so many other sins in the assemblies. We also treat them very lightly. Divisiveness, fighting for positions, court cases, litigation against brethren, closing of assembly halls, fighting in families, in-law problems, blackmailing of God’s servants, financial fraud, business cheating, dowry fights (may be peculiar to India), property feuds, groups, party spirit, racism, caste-based segregation, the list goes. These heinous things are skillfully masked, readily tolerated, accommodated and preachers/teachers have no problem in going to such places/assemblies, and associating and partnering with them in the ministry. The divorced and remarried are so visible. But the sins of the rest of us are so invisible. It is a comfort to many.

I know of places where our public testimony has been lost for years, but without reconciliation and restoration, believers make a mockery of the Gospel in front of the public who do not give any value to the hypocrisy they have seen all along. Anything other than divorce and remarriage can be accommodated, tolerated and adjusted! The world wonders at this new spirituality!

A Pastoral Crisis

The single greatest issue facing the assemblies is leadership. Since the pastoral/shepherding aspect of leadership is *not emphasized or only minimally practiced, or even absent* among most assemblies, the people who go through marital struggles are seldom cared for, visited or counseled, supported (*supporting* is not *siding* with them or endorsing their actions, but helping them in their struggles)., or ministered to; no pastoral care. Many of the elders also lack “the skillfulness of hands,” the knowledge and the ability to deal with such situations as they are not trained or equipped either in the Word or in practical/pastoral issues. We try to pretend that the word PASTOR is not even in the Bible. There is no vision or encouragement for full-time elders to do pastoral work. I have seen some of our teachers discouraging the very idea of full-time elders! **Most assemblies suffer due to lack of PASTORAL CARE.** I do not think anyone can deny this. This is a hard reality difficult for us to admit, but true all over the world.

A Ministry of Grace

In many instances, we do not know all the details and circumstances of the tragedies that have befallen on the marriage of many couples. Let us not simply abandon and condemn them all. Let us not try to give the impression that assemblies are only for “perfect” people (I know of people who have left the assemblies because of this reason). Don’t we have to be gracious, loving,

forgiving, compassionate to them, with a willingness to minister to them in their need and to counsel and pray for them? Are we not supposed to reach out to them? Doesn't the New Testament constantly exhort us to continually share the love, mercy and forgiveness which we have received from the Lord? Can't we minister to people with emotional pain from broken relationships? LET US NOT FORGET THAT THERE IS A MINISTRY WITHOUT COMPROMISE ON SIN. Our Lord is the best example of this. In the name of truth, let us not degenerate into *inhumane* attitudes and actions. While we detest the sin of others, we are always called to reach them with the **love, grace and truth of God**. Our Lord was "full of grace and truth." When we establish a climate of understanding, sympathy, love and grace, then we will be able to minister to them effectively for God's glory and their blessing. Brethren history has proved beyond a shadow of doubt, that *a theology of truth without grace* doesn't work.

As we know from the Word, sin is anything that fails to conform to the holy and perfect character or standard of God. We have our own classification and pet ideas of sin. We make *measurements* of sin, but God recognizes no such measurement. God does not have a grading system for sin. "There is none righteous, not even one....All have sinned." There are degrees of consequences and punishment, and every sin doesn't deserve the same penalty. **There is no sin too "big" that God cannot forgive.** Are all sins equal in severity and consequence? NO. In forgivability? YES. Thank God. Amazing grace! Let us minister that grace to a hurting world along with the proclamation of the truth.

Conclusion

I am always challenged and moved by that verse in Matt.7:12: "Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Simple, but very profound; even shocking! TREAT OTHERS AS WE OURSELVES WISH TO BE TREATED. An inspired golden rule - God's people should be gracious in how they treat others. What an apt message for us to heed! I know that I may still be misunderstood or criticized by some, though I have made my "burden" and "intention" abundantly clear. "The untaught and unstable" may distort my words to mean something quite different. I believe what I have written is worth hearing. **It is the need of the hour.** Even in recent weeks, some families contacted me in relation to the struggles they are going through. But they also lamented, "We do not know where to turn, we can never bring it to the assembly." What a sad state! I sincerely hope and pray that God may give us the grace, vision and courage to make whatever changes may be needed in this area of ministry. When you implement these changes, you may not become *popular*, but will be more *approved* unto God and useful as a channel of blessing to many bleeding souls in need of God's redemptive grace and love. Let us continue to hear the music of grace in God's Word and minister to a world that desperately wants to know, "what is so amazing about grace?" Ultimately, it will be to the praise of His glory.

"Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant" (Gal.1:10).