

“Whoever Divorces His Wife” (Matt. 5:31–32)

By Jacob D. Gerber

In the previous section, Jesus taught against adultery of the heart (Matt. 5:27–30). While lust may seem like a private, individual sin that doesn’t really hurt anyone, Jesus shows its profound moral consequences. If those consequences were so serious for the internal desires, how much more serious should we take the consequences for how we deal with our public marriages? In a culture awash with divorce, Jesus’ words in this short section are devastating; however, we must hear them if we are to understand God’s goodness in human sexuality. More importantly, we must hear what Jesus says if we are to glorify God as he demands. In this section, we see that *Jesus came to sanctify marriages*.

The Abuse of Divorce (Matt. 5:31)

Now, Jesus extends the *negative* teaching against divorce by its *positive* application to marriage.¹ So, Jesus cites Moses’ teaching about divorce from Deuteronomy 24:1: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’” (v. 31). To understand the force of Jesus’ statement, we must recognize the slender basis for divorce in the law. As R. T. France explains, Deuteronomy 24 is “the only pentateuchal passage which speaks directly of divorce, served perforce as the basis for subsequent Jewish teaching on the subject, even though it was not concerned with the rightness or wrongness of divorce in itself, nor with permissible causes of divorce, but only with the aftermath of a divorce which is assumed to have taken place.”²

Even more, while Jesus carefully quotes both the Sixth and the Seventh Commandment in the two previous antitheses (Matt. 5:21, 27; cf. Ex. 20:13, 14), he here offers not the law itself, but only “an interpretive paraphrase” of the law.³ The 1992 PCA Study Report on Divorce and Remarriage draws attention to the strange way that Jesus phrases his statement:

A careful analysis of the intended structure of this lengthy sentence in Hebrew [in Deut. 24:1–4] is crucial for a proper understanding. The first three verses are all part of a compound protasis (or conditional part of the sentence), while the fourth verse contains the apodosis (or consequence). In other words, we should understand the passage in this way: “If a man divorces his wife, and if he gives her a certificate, and if she leaves and remarries, and if her

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 229.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 206.

³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

second husband divorces her or dies, then her first husband may not marry her again.”⁴

Thus, the point of Deuteronomy 24 is not to establish a quick and convenient method for a divorce. Rather, the point is to forbid the first husband from remarrying the wife that he had previously divorced. We should recognize, then, that Jesus is not drawing attention to the true precept of the law—or, much less, to teaching of any of the Ten Commandments. Rather, Jesus is capturing a specific way in which a passage had been misinterpreted, misapplied, and, ultimately, abused. Jesus’ words reflect “a misleading abbreviation or distortion of that passage in the oral teaching of the Pharisees [which] gives the impression that divorce was readily permissible; all one had to do was to go through the formality of handing over a certificate of divorce.”⁵ The overall sense that Jesus is portraying is one that sees divorce as nothing more than “paperwork,” where the only significant issue is whether it was done “by the book.”⁶

This insight is important to understand the point that Jesus is making here, especially when we contrast this passage from Jesus’ more complete teaching on marriage and divorce later in Matthew’s Gospel:

[3] And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” [4] He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, [5] and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ [6] So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” [7] They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” [8] He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. [9] And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matt. 19:3–9)

In that later passage, Jesus will give a fuller explanation of the doctrines of marriage and divorce. Here, Jesus is critiquing the traditional Jewish teaching about divorce for its low view of marriage. John Calvin puts this well: “national laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do, but at what they ought to do. It contains a perfect and entire righteousness, though we want ability to fulfill it.”⁷

The Adultery of Divorce (Matt. 5:32a)

So, Jesus issues another shocking antithesis against the rabbinical teaching: “But I say to you that

⁴ Paul B. Fowler et al., “Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage to the Twentieth General Assembly” (PCA Historical Society, 1992), 208, <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf>.

⁵ Fowler et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 211.

⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:292.

everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery” (v. 32a). We must be careful in reading this, since our tendency is to focus in on the exceptions given that may give grounds for a divorce. We jump over the main point that Jesus is making about the presumed permanency of marriage to identify the exceptions: “But when *can* someone get a divorce?” To be sure, the exception is important. Nevertheless, we must see that Jesus directs our attention to the fact that these exceptions to the rule should be incredibly *exceptional*.⁸

The point that Jesus is making here is that for a man to divorce his wife casually is a grievous sin against her. As Jesus will expound later in Matthew 19 (quoted above), God instituted marriage at creation in order to bind one man and one woman together as one flesh for the entirety of their lives (Gen. 2:24). Thus, the marriage union is foundational for the moral, familial, and societal order of God’s creation. If Jesus could condemn divorce among the Jews who lived during his lifetime, how much more do his words condemn our culture? We have followed in that civilization’s footsteps to embrace the wicked practice of “no fault divorce.” Even more, we have largely set aside the sanctity of marriage in favor of promiscuous sex (whether physical intercourse or rampant heart adultery through pornography) and cohabitation without marriage. Still more, we have redefined the meaning of marriage to include unions between persons of the same sex. Against all this, Jesus holds up the law against adultery to remind us that God’s moral standards for human sexuality have not shifted one millimeter since the day Eve was given to Adam at the beginning of creation.

Against this laxity in marriage, Jesus insists that the man who unlawfully divorces his wife “makes her to suffer adultery.”⁹ If the wife commits sexual immorality, then the fault for the divorce rests on her (we will say more about what this means below). Here, Jesus is blaming any husband who would end his marriage without such cause: “The guilt of breaking the commandment rests on him.”¹⁰ The phrase ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι (*poiei autēn moicheuthēnai*) is a difficult word to translate, since μοιχευθῆναι is the verb “to commit adultery,” but in a passive form that describes something done *to* someone, not something that someone (here, “she”) *does*.¹¹ Calvin may have paraphrased the heart of what Jesus condemns here when he writes that “the man who, unjustly and unlawfully, abandons the wife whom God had given him, is justly condemned for having prostituted his wife to others.”¹² The responsibility for this sin is the husband’s, but the woman also suffers in a deep way from his sin.

The reason, then, that sexual immorality constitutes an exception to Jesus’ statement is not that

⁸ I borrow this phrase (that exceptions should be exceptional) from David Strain, who used it in another context: “O Church, Arise (01) – Dr. David Strain | Truth We Confess: Confessional Integrity and the PCA,” May 13, 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hddS9NZpe0>>. Accessed April 5, 2022.

⁹ John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1961), 21.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 232.

¹¹ Lenski makes a fair point that women suffer from their husbands’ sin immediately, “the very moment they [are] driven out” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 232). Nevertheless, his suggested translation of “is stigmatized as adulterous” (p. 233) is too weak. The ensuing context, where Jesus says that any man who divorces her would commit adultery (v. 32b) makes clear that this woman is *made* an adulteress in some sense by her husband’s actions. See also Murray, *Divorce*, 21–23 n. 2, 98–103; Fowler et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 212–13.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:293.

such immorality justifies the other person from breaking his or her marriage vows. On the contrary, sexual immorality constitutes an actual violation of the marriage vows by the guilty party. As much as God intended for marriage never to be broken, adultery *does* break a marriage, and divorce acknowledges that fact. A quotation attributed to Geerhardus Vos in the 1992 PCA Study Report on divorce and remarriage captures this point well:

We may have on our parlor table a beautiful and costly vase. It ought to be handled carefully. It ought not to be broken. It was not made to be smashed; it was made to exist as a thing of beauty and grace. But it is not impossible to break it. And if a member of the family breaks it through carelessness, or in a fit of temper smashes it deliberately, there is nothing to do but sweep up the broken fragments and dispose of them. We will not say, “This vase was not intended to be broken; therefore it is impossible to break it; the vase is unbreakable; therefore in spite of the fact that it lies in shattered fragments on the floor, we will not throw it away; we will keep it forever.” No one would say that about a broken vase; yet that is substantially the argument of those who say that the marriage bond is “indissoluble” and “unbreakable.”¹³

What, then, constitutes such “sexual immorality”? Again, the 1992 PCA Study Report is helpful to differentiate the terms “adultery” from “sexual immorality”: “whereas adultery refers to the marital unfaithfulness, fornication is broader and can encompass all sexual sin including adultery. As the logicians and linguists would say, ‘adultery’ is not part of the **intention** of *porneia*; it is part of its **extension**. *Porneia* is a class, and within the class you may have a number of specific sins which may be referred to like adultery or homosexuality or prostitution.”¹⁴

The Study Report goes on to give still more helpful guidance, which I will quote here at length because of its thorough evaluation of this difficult question:

We agree that *porneia* refers to “sexual immorality.” But sexual immorality could be understood to include all kinds of sexual sins such as inordinate lust, pornography, or masturbation. To be sure, these are sins that impinge against the one-flesh relationship, but they do not necessarily break it.

We ask then, “What does Jesus mean by *porneia* in this passage as a grounds for divorce?” We believe Jesus intended *porneia* to be understood in a more limited way, as referring to those external sexual actions which would clearly break the one-flesh principle of marriage. The whole passage centers on a marriage relationship and the exception focuses on an act that may become the reason for a divorce. Therefore, we must distinguish between those sexual sins that clearly break the one-flesh union and those that don’t. Adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, and incest are examples of sexual immorality that break the one-flesh union precisely because they involve sexual union with a being other than one’s marriage partner, i.e., they amount to adultery.

¹³ Cited in Fowler et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 206.

¹⁴ Fowler et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 220.

Other acts of sexual immorality do not as clearly serve to break the one-flesh relationship. The committee would argue that masturbation and the destructive sin of pornography per se are not grounds for divorce, because they do not unmistakably break the one-flesh relationship; but if a person becomes so obsessed with them that they become a substitute for fulfilling the conjugal rights of the spouse, then they could be understood to break the one-flesh union. Other examples of habitual sexual sin could be cited. But all of these are unclear cases, and judgment will have to rest with the Session in their application of biblical principles.

The guiding principle should be whether the sexual sin does indeed break the one-flesh relationship. Some sexual sins may hurt the marriage union without necessarily breaking it. But when that sexual sin becomes externalized in such a way that it becomes a substitute for the one-flesh relation with one's spouse, then the Session may judge it as being the equivalent of *porneia*.¹⁵

Once again, the goal is not to find loopholes to get *out* of a marriage. As Lenski writes, Jesus is not “legislating or speaking of legal steps” but rather “dealing with the sinful acts which disrupt a marriage in violation of the divine commandment.”¹⁶

The Adultery of Remarriage (Matt. 5:32b)

Lastly, Jesus closes the loop of his logic: “and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (v. 32b). If we were distracted by the “exception” clause, this phrase brings us back to the true focus of Jesus’ words. Jesus is reminding us that marriage is a permanent bond between a husband and a wife. Simply sending her away in a divorce does not break the bond as cleanly as we would like to think, so that remarriage after improper divorce constitutes adultery, regardless of whether someone may have legal standing in the eyes of the state to do so. Also, this is where we see the significance of the exception clause: sexual immorality *does* break the bond of marriage, freeing the innocent party to remarry without thereby committing adultery in the new marriage.

What all of this tells us is that we must be far more diligent and careful to protect our marriages. The fresh, eager, young couple at the altar can scarcely understand what it is that they are doing when they make their vows to be faithful to one another. Indeed, married couples spend the rest of their marriage seeking to work out the full implications of what they promised to many years earlier. What Jesus gives us here, though, is a clear statement of the absolute moral demands of God in the marriage relationship. May God forgive us of our sin in this area, and give us grace to live this out according to his word.

¹⁵ Fowler et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 223.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 234.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Deuteronomy 24:1–4 teach? How do Moses’ words there underscore the sanctity of marriage? How does Jesus paraphrase Deuteronomy 24:1 (v. 31)? What does this paraphrase suggest about the meaning of that passage? How was the culture of the day abusing this passage in their marriages? How does Jesus’ misquotation subtly convict this practice? Where do we see a similar laxity toward marriage and divorce in our own culture?
2. What does Jesus mean when he says that the man who divorces his wife causes her to “suffer adultery” (v. 32a)? Who is the guilty party in this situation? What consequences does the divorced wife suffer from her husband’s sin? What is “sexual immorality”? Why is sexual immorality an exception to Jesus’ teaching on the permanency of marriage? Why is it important that we not try to read this section to find loopholes out of marriages?
3. On what basis would a man who marries a divorced woman commit adultery? Why is Jesus so strict about this fact? What would you say to someone in this position who is considering this kind of marriage? What is at stake in this situation, from the perspective of our culture’s view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage? What is at stake here from the perspective of God and his holy law?
4. In general, what is our culture’s attitude toward marriage, divorce, and remarriage? In how many ways might the world find Jesus’ words offensive here? Why is marriage so important to God? Why did God ordain marriage at creation? Why does Jesus take the sanctification of marriage upon himself as a part of his mission in to this world? How has Jesus’ words led you to recognize and repent from some of the ways in which you may cheapen the institution of marriage?