

You Said, But I Say – Part 4

“It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced commits adultery.” – Matthew 5:31-32

We move naturally from the discussion of adultery and lust to the question of divorce in our continuing study of the Sermon on the Mount. At one time divorce was rarely a problem found in evangelical circles, but to our shame, it is no longer the case. In fact, statistics indicate a divorce rate within the church that is closely approaching that of the world. One evangelical writer states that love and marriage have become nothing more than “a mixture of physical desire and vague sentimentality; a provisional sexual union to be terminated when this pathetic, pygmy love dissolves.”

Unfortunately, many commentators skip this passage for it is a controversial and complex subject. It is my desire to write with sensitivity, for many suffer with bitterness and pain and I do not want to add to their distress. Yet, in an effort to “declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), let us proceed.

Jesus continues his refutation of what the scribes and Pharisees had set as the standard – a standard which they had claimed to receive from rabbinical teachings and “them of old time.” (v.21) Divorce had become as easy as finding some imperfection in the wife as trivial as serving her husband food accidentally burned, or her plain looks, or even if he found someone more beautiful. Jesus condemns the fact that divorces were being granted on the most frivolous of pretenses. The Pharisees' perspective was one of divorce and the necessary paper work; our Lord's perspective was a high view of marriage.

A combination of cultures, Jewish, Roman and Greek, over a long period of time had set the stage for what Jesus had encountered here in this passage. The Jews knew the passage well: “For I hate divorce, says the LORD.” (Mal. 2:16) Tragically, in practice, the marriage relationship had degraded to the extent that the woman had become no more than a “thing.” The Jews had been trained in two rival rabbinical schools of thought. One was the school of Shammai, who taught that divorce was allowed only in the case of adultery or unlawful sexual misconduct. The other was the school of Hillel who taught that divorce was allowed for the most trivial of offenses. The Pharisees obviously were attracted to the lax teachings of Hillel: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” (Mat. 19:3)

As for the Greeks marital unfaithfulness was part of the ordinary routine of life as this statement from that period indicates: “We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs.”

Finally for the Romans, for the first five hundred years, there was no single recorded case of divorce. However, by the second century B.C., Greek morality had infiltrated the Roman culture so that divorce had become as common as marriage. An orator of that time stated, “If, Romans, it were possible to love without wives, we would be free from trouble; but since it is the law of nature that we can neither live pleasantly with them, nor at all without them, we must take thought to the continuance of the race rather than for our own brief pleasure.” Such is the background.

The reasoning for divorce and a “certificate of dismissal” (writing of divorcement) was based on an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.”

The intent of this passage is not an issue of whether divorce is permissible. It does not make provision for divorce nor demand it. The passage reveals how divorce leads to adultery, which leads to defilement. God's allowance

for divorce was His response to human sin: “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.” (Mat. 19:8) Deuteronomy 24 does not refer to the issue of adultery, for the penalty in that case was death. (Lev. 20:10)

To clarify further Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, it would be wise to include the text from Matthew 19 in our discussion: “And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?' And He answered and said, 'Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, “FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH?” Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate. They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY?' He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.’” (v. 3-9) Jesus refers them to Genesis 2:24 where marriage was to be exclusive (a man (male) . . his wife (female)) and permanent (cleave or joined to his wife). The emphasis is also on what God had joined together, no one should separate; they are no longer two, but one flesh. By God's own definition, marriage is a divine institution by which He permanently makes one out of two people who decidedly and publicly leave their parents in order to form a new unit of society by becoming “one flesh.” Divorce is always a deviation from the original marriage institution.

The statement “except for immorality” is known as the “exception clause.” The word “immorality” or “unchastity” is the Greek word “porneia”, which by the best Greek references, is defined ‘adultery (immorality by the married), fornication (immorality by the unmarried) and unnatural vice.’ Other sources refer to some act of physical sexual immorality. Moses had been divinely instructed to allow for divorce in these cases, but not for any cause. It was an allowance that changed into a command by the hypocritical teachings of the Pharisees. Divorce was permitted to prevent worse crimes and misery, namely those associated with adultery.

Such a complex issue demands our continued study in the next article. I close with this comment by the eloquent preacher John Chrysostom, who linked this passage with that of the Beatitudes: “For he that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful, how shall he cast off his wife? He that is used to reconcile others, how shall he be at variance with her that is his own?”