

May 4, 2008

DEALING WITH DIVORCE

MATTHEW 5.31-32

While the Law specifically found in Deut 24 focused on and regulated subsequent remarriage after a certificate of divorce was given, Jesus focuses on not pursuing divorce but rather maintaining marriages.

1. REGULATING REMARRIAGE IN THE OLD ORDER (31)

Cf. Dt 24.1-4 (cp. Mt 19.1-10; Jesus says there that Moses *permitted* divorce because of the hardness of their hearts.)

Moses was regulating an activity that was already being practiced. The people of God seem to have been divorcing and remarrying for less than proper reasons. The law stemmed the tide and regulated remarriage.

But this is not the “fulfilled” intention for marriage. The Law anticipated a greater fulfillment; something we find here.

The Law itself was subject to abuse through rationalization because of man’s sin (and still is!). Rabbinical schools: Hillel (more liberal), a man could divorce for *any* cause; e.g., burning his food. Shammai: only for sexual immorality, but then *must* divorce. Aquiba (later than Jesus): if she is no longer beautiful to him or if another woman is more beautiful.

Jesus, in bringing the fulfillment of the Law, not only deals with these abuses but the final intention of God’s Law.

2. REGULATING DIVORCE IN THE NEW ORDER (32)

Fulfillment: doesn’t mean the law was bad. Provisions were temporary and would give way to greater glory. More like childhood to adulthood, immaturity to maturity. Law is not being annulled (cf. 5.17-20).

Jesus intends to bring marriage to its divine intention.

Divorce and adultery: The consequences of divorce Jesus mentions stem from an illegitimate divorce. That is, this man (and it is the man upon whom it is focused) does not have legal grounds in God’s Law for divorce.

Difficulty: “makes her to commit adultery” or “to be an adulteress.” Popular interpretation: In this culture if a man divorced his wife, he was forcing her to remarry after an illegitimate divorce, thus causing her to commit adultery.

Problem with that: I don’t think it deals adequately with what Jesus actually says. There is nothing in this clause that even hints at remarriage as, e.g., there is in the next clause. I think this reads too much into Jesus’ words.

Plain reading of the text indicates that it is the act of divorce itself that *makes* the woman to be an adulteress. Difficulty is how this is so.

(1) The focus of this text is upon the man and not primarily the woman. The sin that is being committed is that of the man who is divorcing his wife illegitimately.

(2) How does the man *make* the woman to be an adulteress? Jesus is giving a proper interpretation of the Law of Moses and drawing the implications from that of what an illegitimate divorce would create. Jesus indicates that unfaithfulness to the covenant of marriage is the only legitimate grounds for divorce

If a man, therefore, puts away his wife, he is “making her out to be” an adulteress. The man can’t literally “force” her to be an adulteress. Some women lived unmarried lives in that culture (cp. Anna in Lk 2 who was a young widow never remarried).

What the man can do is falsely accuse his wife of being unfaithful to the marriage. He stigmatizes his wife when he divorces her.

“whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Not an absolute prohibition against remarriage, but it is remarriage after an illegitimate divorce.

Focus is upon the sin of the man. The men are the ones mistreating the brides in Israel, not taking God’s intentions for marriage seriously.

In God’s Law adultery was punishable by death. In both of these cases, the men would be subject to that penalty.

In the first case the man is falsely accusing his wife of adultery. Any time a person falsely accused another, the false witness was subject to the penalty he wished to see inflicted upon the accused (Dt 19.16-21). This man would then deserve death.

The second case is a bit more obvious. He is guilty of adultery and thus subject to the death penalty.

“Except for covenant infidelity”: Note: Jesus should not be pitted against Moses. Jesus does not say, “It has been said, whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you, you shall not divorce your wife for any cause....”

Jesus, like Moses, allows for divorce. The grounds = *porneia*. Normally trans. “sexual immorality” or “fornication.”

Cp. Mt 19.5. Jesus refers back to God’s original intention in Gen 2.24. Marriage is defined and from that we understand what infidelity to this covenant is. Three aspects:

(1) Leaving father and mother. More than just moving out of the house. Leaving father and mother entails the establishment of a new household so that you will not relate to them in the same way that you have in the past.

(2) The man is to cleave to his wife. Faithfulness within this marriage bond is the connotation of the word “cleave” or “hold fast.” The word is used a number of times to speak about covenant loyalty (cf. Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:4 [5]; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8).

Involves your obligations to this covenant. Cf. e.g., for the man Ex 21.10, “If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.” Learn the basic responsibilities of a man toward his wife.

(3) The two becoming one flesh deals with the sexual nature of the marriage covenant (even though it is much deeper than the mere activity of sexual relations). Cf. 1 Cor 6.16. Marriage is a sexual relationship.

Porneia - (Greg Bahnsen’s work) *Porneia* in the LXX and NT refers to pre-marital unchastity (Ezek 23.11-19; John 8.41), sex outside of marriage by a widow (Gen 38.24), returning to a divorced spouse after an intervening union (Jer 3.1-2), adultery (Jer 13.27; Hos 2.2), prostitution (Deut 23.18; Micah 1.7; 1Cor 6.6-18), incest (1Cor 5.1), homosexuality (Jud 7), marrying foreign wives (Heb 12.16; cf. Gen 26.34-35), or inter-religious sexual union (1Cor 10.8; cf. Num 25.1-9). But the word not only refers to sexual immorality but it is also used generally for covenant unfaithfulness, even when there is no reference to specific sexual sins. Arrogance is characterized as *porneia* (Isa 47.10) along with disbelieving God (Num 14.11, 33) and departure from God’s standards of righteousness (Isa 1.21; 57.3; 2Ki 9.22). “In Paul’s epistles ‘fornication’ is sometimes run together with uncleanness, covetousness and idolatry as a way of covering all forms of immoral conduct (e.g., Eph 5.3; Col 3.5; 1Thess 4.3-7).” *Porneia* also covers all of the abominations of Israel (Rev 17.4; 19.2). The whole of our sanctification, the will of God for our lives is, “avoid *porneia*” (1Thess 4.3; cf. Heb 12.14, 16).

porneia = covenant infidelity. The covenant is defined in Gen 2.24.

(1) Leaving father and mother. Desertion of your spouse is covenant infidelity. (Cp. Paul’s reasoning in 1 Cor 7.15)

(2) “Cleaving.” A man is to be faithful to his obligations. E.g., providing for (cf. 1 Tm 5.8; cp. Ex 21.10); protecting his wife (either refusing to do so or actively abusing; Ex 21.10).

(3) When the one flesh relationship is violated, there are legitimate grounds for divorce. Involves all sorts of sexual immorality. (Even includes not telling spouse before marriage that you had sex before marriage. He/She has the grounds for divorce if he/she discovers this. You have entered into covenant on false pretenses. Cf. Deut 22:13-21.)

Divorce is *permitted* in all of these cases, though not *required*. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation are preferable. Repentance is required (not just promised).

Refocusing: Be the new humanity. Be what God intended. Stop the cycle of divorce and remarriage. Focus on having good marriages as the people of God (cf. Eph 5.18ff.). Don’t look for loopholes to be released from your marriage.

Consolation for the divorced: There is forgiveness and restoration for those who have sinned in this area. There are still consequences, but God is a God of healing, restoration, and making things beautiful out of even the most sinful situations. Look at the cross.