



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 08**  
**Matthew 5:31-32 : Topic 8.0**

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**Greek NT**

5.31 Ἐρρέθη δέ, Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον. 5.32 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

31 Bisher hieß es: 'Wer sich von seiner Frau trennen will, muss ihr eine Scheidungsurkunde ausstellen.' 32 Ich aber sage euch: Wer sich von seiner Frau trennt, außer sie hat ihrerseits die Ehe gebrochen, der treibt sie in den Ehebruch. Und wer eine Geschiedene heiratet, wird zum Ehebrecher.

**NRSV**

31 It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce." 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

**NLT**

31 You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a letter of divorce.' 32 But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

This very short passage proves to be one of the most difficult pericopes in the entire Sermon! Unquestionably, it has occasioned the most controversy in the history of interpretation, i.e., die Wirkungsgeschichte des Textes. Also, it is unlike the other pericopes in this section, Mt. 5:21-48, because Jesus' contrastive declaration here involves action rather than inner attitude and/or verbal expression. Thus instead of the two or three dimensional idea expression,<sup>2</sup> we are dealing with a one dimensional perspective of action only.



In order to adequately deal with the ideas in these two verses, the longer parallel text of Matt. 19:3-12, together with the parallels of Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18, must be considered. Added to that is also Paul's distinctive perspective in 1 Cor. 7:1-20, 25-40. The Pauline teaching provides critical understanding of how the Jesus' tradition was understood in the early church, which is mostly different than the way this Jesus' tradition is interpreted today. Only then can one come to solid conclusions about the intent of Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:31-32.

**Historical Context:**

On the issue of divorce in the teaching of Jesus one must carefully consider the historical situation of marriage and divorce in the first century world. The idea of marriage in that world was very different than in modern western culture; also the idea of divorce was very different across the different cultures in the ancient world. Because we have to give attention to both layers<sup>3</sup> of target audiences by the gospel documents, these backgrounds play an important role in the interpretive process.

**Marriage and Divorce in the Greco-Roman world:**

One aspect that is critically important to remember: a large age gap normally existed between the husband and wife in the ancient world. In that world, marriages were arranged by the parents or guardians of the individuals. In both Roman and Greek society the man was normally in his mid twenties or beyond,

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>Two dimensional structure: Action / Attitude. Three dimensional: Action / Attitude / Verbal Expression.

<sup>3</sup>*Sitz im Leben Jesu*: the almost exclusive Jewish audience who heard these words from Jesus in the late 20s in Palestine. *Sitz im Leben Kirche* (or *Sitz im Leben Verfassers*): the target audience of the gospel writers which varied. Matthew's audience was dominantly Jewish Christian, while Mark's and Luke's audiences were overwhelmingly non-Jewish in the Greco-Roman culture in the late 60s through early 80s in differing regions of the Mediterranean world. The shaping of the words of Jesus for each individual target audience will become dramatically apparent with this topic.

and the woman was a beginning teenager who had passed through puberty recently. The Greek culture determined marriageability for the male somewhere in his mid-twenties. But in Roman society, the father determined the age of marriageability exclusive of the boy's age. Typically it was from the late 20s to middle 30s, as decided upon by the father. Likewise, the father of the girl normally tried to 'marry off' his daughter as soon as she was physically able to bear children. Consequently, in the typical Greco-Roman marriage the relationship began when the girl was in her early teens and the boy was in his late twenties. That meant about a fifteen year age difference between the couple. Frequently, this difference could be substantially greater. Given the fact that the man in Greco-Roman society did not ordinarily see his fiftieth birthday, most marriages would not last more than fifteen to twenty years before the death of the husband. Most wives were widowed before their thirtieth birthday.

Divorce in Greek and Roman<sup>4</sup> customs took somewhat distinctive directions. In Greek culture from the classical era in the third century BCE onward, divorce was the option of the husband, but not of the wife. In some instances the wife's father might instigate a divorce process in order to get back the dowry that had been put up in the wedding contract. In Roman society during the Empire era women could initiate divorce proceedings against their husband in the court system, but more commonly the man would file for legal divorce from his wife. Women in higher social classes had considerably more freedom than did those of the peasant class. Whereas the Greek woman pretty much was bound to stay inside the home except for rare occasions, the Roman woman could move about outside the home more freely. In both Greek and Roman traditions divorce involved going through a legal process with the court in order to settle dowry claims etc. In both ancient Greece and especially in ancient Roman society, divorce was very common, especially among the wealthier classes of people. In the earlier period some reasonably serious reason had to be given as a basis for divorce, but by the beginning of the Empire at the start of the Christian era most anything constituted as grounds for divorce.

#### **Marriage and Divorce in the ancient Jewish world:**

Jewish patterns in the ancient world had some things in common with the Greco-Roman culture. But many significant differences were also present. Marriages were also arranged by the fathers of the two individuals. Jewish custom did not consider the male an adult, i.e., marriageable, until his thirtieth birthday. The female became eligible for marriage at puberty in her early teens much like the rest of the ancient world. Thus the age gap between husband and wife in a Jewish home was often wider than in the Greco-Roman society. The life-expectancy of the Jewish male was generally the same as males in that world in general. They seldom made it out of their 40s. Thus the usual length of a marriage was less than twenty years before the death of the husband made the young wife a widow. At her husband's death the young Jewish wife went back under the care of her father, or oldest brother. If possible, she would be married off again to someone else. One very distinct aspect of ancient Jewish society was the provision for the community, namely the synagogue, to assume responsibility for the care



<sup>4</sup>Here are some of the Latin terms related to marriage and divorce: The Latin expressions for betrothal, marriage, and divorce provide insight into the related Roman customs; for instance, just as in English, the Romans refer to 'giving' a daughter in marriage. Unlike marriages in America, in a Roman marriage, a Roman man is said to 'lead' (ducere) his wife. Although a dowry is brought into a marriage, the dowry is 'given' to the daughter. When a wife divorces her husband, she 'repudiates' him. Although we may not be aware of this, that is what repudiate means, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, which defines repudiate as

1545, "to cast off by divorce," from adj. meaning "divorced, rejected, condemned" (1464), from L. repudiatus, pp. of repudiare "to divorce or reject," from repudium "divorce, rejection," from re- "back, away" + pudium, probably related to pes-/ped- "foot."

Here are some of the Classical Latin marriage-related expressions:

- \***filiam alicui despondere** - to betroth one's daughter to someone
- \***nuptias conciliare** - to prepare a marriage
- \***uxorem habere** - to have a wife
- \***dotem filiae dare** - to give one's daughter a dowry
- \***ducere uxorem** - to marry (for the man)
- \***nubere alicui** - to marry someone (for the woman) [Nubere literally means 'to cover or veil', so a woman marries by putting on the veil.]
- \***repudium remittere alicui** - to divorce someone

[Source: Latin Marriage Vocabulary]

of widows when no family was available to care for her. In the non-Jewish society of that time, such a widow was 'on her own' and often had to resort to prostitution or volunteer slavery in order to survive.

Divorce in ancient Judaism did not involve a court procedure. Instead, the husband, who alone had the option of divorce, simply handed her a written statement declaring her to be divorced and sent her packing. The document, called a Get in modern Judaism,<sup>5</sup> grows out of the declaration in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NRSV):

1 Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so **he writes her a certificate of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house 2 and goes off to become another man's wife. 3 Then suppose the second man dislikes her, **writes her a bill of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); 4 her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.



Some of the details of this will be considered below since Jesus interacts with this Old Testament passage in His discussion of divorce. At the beginning of the Christian era, divorce among Jews was very wide spread, although the grounds for divorce coming out of Deut. 24:1 above were hotly debated. The primary curb on divorce was the terms set up in the marriage contract, called the Ketubah, by the two fathers. Often specific terms regarding a refund of the dowry in case of divorce were set up in the contract. This increased the financial cost of divorce significantly and helped to limit the tendency. But the process of divorce, by not requiring a court process, made divorce relatively simple for the Jewish husband in the ancient world.

One side note about marriages in general throughout the ancient world. The most common pattern was marriage between distant relatives, usually cousins. Marriage outside the larger clan was the exception rather than the rule, especially in the Semitic cultures of the Middle East. In general, marriage was a contract between two large family units and the producing of children represented a 'mixing of the blood' of the two families, which was intended to bond them together in greater peace and harmony.

Also remarriage was common in the ancient world, especially among the Romans. From the time of Augustus, Roman law mandated that widows remarry, if they wanted to be able to inherit property.<sup>6</sup> Physical health and financial concerns lay behind this tradition.



Marriage, and subsequently divorce, in the ancient world had tones and aspects that are dramatically different than in the modern world. Thus when one comes to the biblical texts much caution needs to be exercised in applying the concepts. The biblical texts are unquestionably addressing marriage as it was understood basically in the Israelite and Jewish worlds of that ancient time. Timeless truths emerge from these texts as objectives and expectations of God upon His people for all times. But a one-to-one transfer of the surface meanings of the texts is impossible and leads to twisted, false understandings.

### Literary Aspects:

This pericope is the shortest of the six passages in this series of Premise / Antithesis declarations found in 5:21-47. But the core form follows the usual pattern.

### Literary Form:

The pattern here is similar to those in the other pericopes in 5:21-47, except no

<sup>5</sup>Within Judaism today, particularly Orthodox Judaism, such a document must be obtained from a qualified rabbi by individuals wishing to divorce and remain in their Jewish faith. This is in addition to the legal processes required by the country where the couple live. It is the husband's responsibility to secure such a document and to gain the consent of his wife to the terms spelled out in the document. Apart from this document a Jewish couple are considered to still be married, even though they may have been granted a divorce by the civil authorities where they live. If the husband doesn't wish to divorce, his wife may sue for divorce in a rabbinical court and if found valid the court will require the husband to divorce his wife. The ancient Jewish wife had no such option.

<sup>6</sup>Among the Romans, "most instances of remarriage were optional for men but mandatory for women. Most wives were encouraged to remarry after either the death of the husband or a divorce. Ancient physicians believed that a woman was liable to get very sick if she was deprived of sexual activity and it could even lead to a women getting 'hysterical uterine constriction'. Women would also usually need financial assistance from a husband so she was encouraged to remarry for health and financial reasons. There was even legislation passed during the rule of Augustus that required widows to remarry to be able to fully inherit." ["Marriage in Ancient Rome: Remarriage and Widowhood," Wikipedia.com]



everyone divorcing his wife  
apart from immorality  
causes her  
to commit adultery,  
and  
whoever marries a divorced woman  
commits adultery.

### Exegesis of the Text:

**Premise declaration from Deut. 24:1:** “It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce” (Ἐρρέθη δέ, “Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον).

In statement 46, Jesus alluded to Deuteronomy 24:1, “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so **he writes her a certificate of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house ...”. One important aspect of this can be easily overlooked.<sup>8</sup> Jesus’ summation assumes an interpretation of the OT text that was popular in the first century world. Hotly debated among the Jewish scribes of Jesus’ time was whether or not divorce was required when the husband found “something objectionable about her” (cf. Deut. 24:1).<sup>9</sup>

Additionally one must note the thrust of Deut. 24:1 in the context of verses 1-4.<sup>10</sup>

1 Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so **he writes her a certificate of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house 2 and goes off to become another man’s wife. 3 Then suppose the second man dislikes her, **writes her a bill of divorce**, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); 4 her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

Moses’ words about divorce in this context was given as a curb on reckless divorcing of wives and then remarrying his ex-wife after she had passed through another man. The thrust of his words were to prevent the remarrying of his ex-wife. The process of handing her a written document declaring her divorced was explicitly to release her from obligations of her marriage so that she would be eligible to remarry. The command aspect was the requirement to provide the woman with a formal document freeing her from her marriage for the purpose of remarriage. In that earlier day, women would normally be sent packing by their husband without any formal statement of being free from the authority of their husband. This made remarriage complex if not impossible for her in that day. Thus Moses’ instructions served to protect the woman and give her the possibility of remarriage.



<sup>8</sup>“The thesis in v. 31 contains a very special OT regulation. It is a free paraphrase of the OT regulation of divorce in Deut 24:1. Strictly speaking there is no command there; the regular divorce with a bill of divorce is mentioned only in connection with the prohibition to the man against remarrying his divorced ex-wife (Deut 24:4).” [Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew 1-7 : A Commentary*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 249.]

<sup>9</sup>A comparison of the LXX text of Deut. 24:1 and Matt. 5:31 illustrates the issue:

**Deut. 24:1**, Ἐὰν δέ τις λάβῃ γυναῖκα καὶ συνοικήσῃ αὐτῇ, καὶ ἔσται ἂν μὴ εὖρη χάριν ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ, ὅτι εὗρεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα, καὶ **γράψει αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου...**

**Matt. 5:31**, Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, **δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον.**

The future tense of the LXX text is changed to the Aorist imperative form in Matt. 24:1. Some of the scribes took the Hebrew verb (בְּהִלָּה) to carry a command to divorce, while others understood the matter to be optional, “if he does...”. Jesus’ statement reflects the scribal position understanding this as a command. Thus he alludes not just to the Deut. 24:1 text, but more so to a current interpretation of it in his day.

<sup>10</sup>LXX text: 1 Ἐὰν δέ τις λάβῃ γυναῖκα καὶ συνοικήσῃ αὐτῇ, καὶ ἔσται ἂν μὴ εὖρη χάριν ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ, ὅτι εὗρεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα, καὶ γράψει αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσει εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς καὶ ἐξαποστελεῖ αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ, 2 καὶ ἀπελθοῦσα γένηται ἀνδρὶ ἑτέρῳ, 3 καὶ μισήσῃ αὐτὴν ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἔσχατος καὶ γράψει αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσει εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς καὶ ἐξαποστελεῖ αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ, ἢ ἀποθάνῃ ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἔλαβεν αὐτὴν ἑαυτῷ γυναῖκα, 4 οὐ δύνησεται ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ πρότερος ὁ ἐξαποστείλας αὐτὴν ἐπαναστρέψας λαβεῖν αὐτὴν ἑαυτῷ γυναῖκα μετὰ τὸ μιανθῆναι αὐτὴν, ὅτι βδέλυγμα ἔστιν ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου, καὶ οὐ μιανεῖτε τὴν γῆν, ἣν κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν δίδωσιν ὑμῖν ἐν κλήρῳ.

When Matthew comes back to this topic in 19:3-12,<sup>11</sup> more insight into what Jesus understood about the Deut. text surfaces. The Pharisees who posed the divorce issue to Jesus reflected the command understanding of Moses' words ("Why...did Moses command"). Jesus' response reflects another view of Moses' words: "Moses **permitted** you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard" (Μωϋσῆς πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν **ἐπέτρεψεν** ὑμῖν ἀπολῦσαι τὰς γυναῖκας ὑμῶν). Moses didn't demand men to divorce, but allowed it as a concession to the "hardness of the hearts" of the men (πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν). And Jesus quickly presses the issue back to the divine ideal (But it was not this way from the beginning.) stated in Genesis 1 - 2: "Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.'" (Mt. 19:4-6).

One should note that the Matthean text deals only with the Jewish option of a man divorcing his wife. In the Jewish setting of Jesus' words, this would be logical, since only the man could divorce his wife. Interestingly, Mark in Jesus' response adds the option of a wife divorcing her husband, which would have been common in the Roman society that Mark is writing to with his gospel.<sup>12</sup>

What can we conclude about the issue of Moses' words in Deut. 24 and Jesus' use of them? Let me suggest the following:

a) Moses attempted to curb reckless divorce in his day where women were being 'passed around' by men from one to another. He forbid such practice which appears to have been especially common in the Canaanite culture the Israelites moved into in the Exodus.

b) The prescribing of a written document of divorce, i.e., the Get, represents a concern to guarantee the legal rights of the woman. In the Patriarchal era when polygamy was prevalent, no such requirement was present, as the instance of Abraham sending Hagar away illustrates.<sup>13</sup> Thus Moses' instructions helped protect the Israelite woman against abuse.

c) Jesus acknowledged Moses' guidelines as a concession to the sinfulness of humanity that prompted the move to divorce. In his reaction to the Pharisaical testing of Him (Matt. 19:3-12; Mk. 10:2-12), He pressed the issue back to the original intention of monogamous marriage of one man and one woman in a life-long commitment. He refused to get involved in the scribal debates over the meaning of Deut. 24:1 current in His day.

d) Given the widespread practice of divorce by Jews in Jesus' day, the scribal debate centered on two aspects of Deut. 24:1. **First, did Moses require or permit divorce?** In the gospel reflection of this debate, Matthew and Mark reflect different perspectives. Matthew assumes the 'requirement' view, as reflected in "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" (Mt. 5:31) and "Why then, they [the Pharisees] asked, 'did Moses **command** that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'" (Mt. 19:7). But Mark in recording the same event as Matt. 19 describes, assumes the permission view by the Pharisees: "They said, 'Moses **allowed** a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce

<sup>11</sup>Matt. 19:3-12 (NRSV): 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." 7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." 10 The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." 11 Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

<sup>12</sup>Mark. 10:2-12 (NRSV): 2 Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" 3 He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. 6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 10 Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and **if she divorces her husband** and marries another, she commits adultery."

<sup>13</sup>Gen. 21:14 (NRSV): 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

her.” The reason for this difference in presenting the views of the Pharisees is not clear, although the requirement view was the more dominant view among Jews of Jesus’ day.

**Second**, what was the objectionable thing that served as the basis for divorcing the wife in Deut. 24:1? Multiple views of Moses’ words were common in Jesus’ day, but two views were the primary ones. The Jewish Mishnah summarizes the debates in the Nashim section in tractate Gittin 9.20:

The School of Shammia say, A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found in her aught improper, as it is said, *because he had found some unseemly thing in her*. But the School of Hillel say, Even if she spoiled a dish for him, as it is said, *because he had found some unseemly thing in her*. R. Akiba says, Even if he found another more beautiful than she is, as it is said, *Then it cometh to pass if she find no favour in his eyes*.

The references in the three rabbinical views are to Deut. 24:1, and more specifically to “because he finds something objectionable about her.” The Shammian view understood this to mean adultery, but the Hillelian school and Rabbi Akiba interpreted the words much broader. Their views were much more popular because they allowed for divorce on almost any grounds by the Jewish man. In Matthew’s accounts, he is narrating Jesus’ words against this Jewish backdrop to a initial readership that was also Jewish and would have been very familiar with these debates. Mark, on the other hand, preserves the Jewish flavor of Jesus’ treatment of Deut. 24:1 in describing the confrontation of Jesus with the Pharisees over the issue of divorce. But he adds expanded perspective that would have made Jesus’ words more relevant to his dominantly non-Jewish readership where the woman had the legal right to divorce her husband as well.

The relevance of this part of the Matthean text to our world is at least as much as this. Divorce represents a failure in human relationships. Unquestionably, marriage is only between a man and a woman. God’s intention in creation was monogamous marriage of one man and one woman in a life-long commitment. The dissolution of that relationship represents a failure to live up to the divine ideal. Moses’ guidelines acknowledge that humanity doesn’t live in an ideal world, and make concessions for this. But at the same time they sought to protect the rights and value of the woman. Jesus’ acknowledged this in His comments in Mt. 19:8 (// Mk. 10:5). In developing a Christian view of marriage and divorce, these foundational principles are important, since they served as the foundation for Jesus’ teaching, and for the apostles elsewhere in the New Testament.

**Jesus’ Antithesis declaration:** “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται).

The formula introduction, “It was also said...But I say to you that...” (Ἐρρέθη δέ... ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι) follows the basic pattern of each of the six pericopes, although with an abbreviated premise introduction. Jesus’ response is structured the exact same way as the other five passages. Jesus responded to each of the topics essentially the same way.

His response has two aspects:

1) “Anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery” (πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι).

2) “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται).

In order to see the picture more clearly we need to get Jesus’ response in the Pharisee confrontation on the table, along with Luke’s inclusion of this saying of Jesus (Lk. 16:18).

**Matt. 19:9.** “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται).

**Mark 10:11-12.** “He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’” (καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, “Ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται ἐπ’ αὐτήν· καὶ ἐάν αὐτὴ ἀπολύσασα τὸν ἄνδρα αὐτῆς γαμήσῃ ἄλλον μοιχᾶται).

**Luke 16:18.** “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery” (Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει, καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει).

The first segment addresses the husband divorcing his wife, while the second segment addresses a man marrying a divorced woman. For him to divorce her apart from the one exception means that he forces her into adultery. The assumption is that she will remarry since the Jewish bill of divorce allowed her to remarry. For her to remarry means she enters into an adulterous relationship with her second

husband. The different perspective in Mt. 19:9 is that the husband in remarrying commits adultery against his first wife. Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18 adopt a similar perspective.

The major difference between Mark and Luke from Matthew is the infamous ‘exception clause’ in both of Matthew’s accounts: “**except on the ground of unchastity**” (παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας) and “**except for marital unfaithfulness**” (μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ). This has occasioned considerable discussion; a wide range of suggestions have been put forth.<sup>14</sup> In general, it means improper sexual activity outside of marriage by the woman. Mark’s narrative is often considered most original and that Matthew has added this exception clause to accommodate the situation of his target audience of Jewish Christians. Perhaps this is the case, but not textual evidence exists in the manuscript copies to validate this claim. And both Mark and Luke contain no exception clause and present Jesus’ teachings as setting forth the rigid ideal of Genesis 2 with no provision for any other option.

The situation of the woman being divorced must be considered in the above interpretive scenario. The Mosaic law required a formal document being given to her so she could remarry. This protected her from the stigma of being considered ‘unclean’ and thus unfit for marriage. In the above interpretive scenario, Jesus’ words removed this protection and made her situation worse by relegating her to a perpetual state of ‘uncleanness’ apart from relationship with her first husband. Thus she becomes ‘untouchable’ and no other man can marry a divorced woman (2 segment).

It’s no wonder that in the controversy narrative of Matt. 19 and Mark 10, the disciples express shock over Jesus’ words. Matt. 19:10, “**The disciples said to him, ‘If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry’**” (λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ, Εἰ οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ αἰτία τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μετὰ τῆς γυναίκος, οὐ συμφέρει γαμήσῃ); Mark 10:10, “**Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter**” (Καὶ εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν πάλιν οἱ μαθηταὶ περὶ τούτου ἐπηρώτων αὐτόν). They recognized the impossibility of implementing such a strict demand.

Jesus’ reply to their concern provides important insight. Matt. 19:11-12, “**Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’**” (ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Οὐ πάντες χωροῦσιν τὸν λόγον τοῦτοῦ ἀλλ’ οἷς δέδοται. εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω); Mark 10:11, “**He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’**” (καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται ἐπ’ αὐτήν· καὶ ἂν αὐτὴ ἀπολύσασα τὸν ἄνδρα αὐτῆς γαμήσῃ ἄλλον μοιχᾶται).

In Matthew, Jesus indicates awareness of the ‘concession of Moses’ in which not everyone is able to live by this high ideal. But the Markan narrative sees Jesus affirming the ideal of Genesis 2 privately to his disciples. In summary, this strongly suggests the idealism of Genesis 2 behind Jesus’ words. By using hyperbolic statements, as often is the case in these six pericopes, the shock effect of Jesus’ words to an audience, living in a time where divorce was rampant and the divine ideal largely lost, pushed the people to rethink their approach to marriage. Consistent with the conceptual thrust of discipleship in the Kingdom focused on building positive relations rather than tearing down relations, this teaching of Jesus urges married couples to work hard at building a strong, healthy relationship in marriage. Divorce represents a serious failure at this point, even though situations will arise where it becomes the ‘lesser to two evils.’

The apostle Paul recognized this in his teaching on divorce in 1 Cor. 7:10-16.

10 To the married I give this command — not I but the Lord — that the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. 12 To the rest I say — I and not the Lord — that if any believer



<sup>14</sup>”The general meaning of πορνεία makes it impossible to define “unchastity” more narrowly. It cannot be defined more precisely as unchastity during the betrothal,<sup>36</sup> as premarital sexual relations,<sup>37</sup> as the wife’s ongoing unrepented adultery or prostitution,<sup>38</sup> as concubinage,<sup>39</sup> as “wild libertinism,”<sup>40</sup> or as flirtation with another man.<sup>41</sup> The exegete’s sexual morals are almost always the progenitor of such attempts. [Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, *Matthew 1-7 : A Commentary*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 249.]



