

Exegesis of Matthew 5:32-33

(with emphasis on v.32)

and Matthew 19:3-9

[Prepared for the Dakota-Montana District, Eastern Conference,
Fall Pastoral Conference, November 6-7, 1973.]

By Gerhold L. Lemke

Twice in the Gospel of Matthew, we have a record of Jesus' teaching on divorce. In both references, 5:32-33 and 19:3-9, Jesus makes it clear that the Jewish practice based on Deuteronomy 24:1 was wrong, and not to be followed by the New Testament Christian Church.

Matthew 5:31

“Errethe de, ‘Hos an apoluse ten gunaika autou, dotō aute apostasion.’

KJV: It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement.

Lenski: Moreover, it was said, Whosoever shall release his wife, let him give her a divorce-certificate.

NASB And it was said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal.

Vocabulary

Errethe - *ereō* - Aor. P. Ind. 3s. - ask, inquire, question.

Impersonal Passive; see Blaszyk/Debrunner, 130,1.

apoluse - *apoluo* - Aor. A. Subj. - loosen, set free; dismiss.

dotō - *didomi* - Aor. Imperative 3s. - give.

apostasion = *biblion apostasiou*, 19:7. Mk. 10:4 - (bill of) divorce.

Here Jesus quotes the Jewish teaching current in his day. Deuteronomy 24:1 reads as follows: “When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.”

This Mosaic legislation was not a *command* encouraging divorce, but *permission* to secure one, lest greater evil result. It was part of the *civil law* of Israel, making the best of a bad situation, protecting a wife at least from an intemperate and hasty action on the part of her husband. Luther writes, “‘It is still not a good thing (to divorce your wives); but since you are such wicked and unmanageable people, it is better to grant you this much than to let you do worse by vexing or murdering each other or by living together in incessant hate, discord, and hostility.’” (*Luther's Works*, Concordia, v.21 p.94.)

Textual variations (one omission and three substitutions) in Matthew 5:31-32 are not weighty enough to force our departure from the text of Nestle's *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

Matthew 5:32

egō do legō humin hoti pas ho apoluōn ten gunaika autou, parektos logou porneias, poiei autēn moicheuthenai; kai hos ean apolelumenen gameōse moichetai.”

KJV: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

Lenski: But I say to you that every man releasing his wife without cause of fornication brings about that she is stigmatized as adulterous; and he who shall marry her that has been released is stigmatized as adulterous.

NASB: But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Vocabulary

apoluon - *apoluo* - Pres. A. Part. - loosen, set free; dismiss.
parektos - Adverb + Gen. - besides.
logou - *logos* - a saying, report; cause, condition.
porneias - *porneia* - fornication; idolatry.
poiei - *poieo* - Pres. A. Ind. 3s. - make, do, bring about, cause.
moicheuthenai - *moicheuo* - Aor. P. Inf. - commit adultery, seduce to
apolelumenen - *apoluo*—Perf. P. Part. - dismiss. adultery.
gamese - *gameo* - Aor. A. Subs. 3s. - marry.
moichatai - *moichao* - Pres. P. Ind. 3s. (Durative) - commit adultery.

Since Jesus was speaking here to an audience of Jews, who knew only of men divorcing women, this verse in our day applies equally to women divorcing men, as we read in Mark 10:12, “If a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.” Mark wrote for Gentiles, as Matthew directed his gospel to the Jews.

The two points at issue in this verse are: 1. For what cause does God allow a divorce? and 2. May the innocent party remarry without becoming guilty of adultery?

To answer the first question, we have the helpful words of P. E. Kretzmann: Adam and Eve’s “being brought together by God constituted the type of marriage in its fullest meaning, as an indissoluble union . . . Where marriage has been entered into . . . where there is unity . . . there they can no more, nevermore, be two distinct (natures), but they are and will remain, in the sight of God, *one* flesh . . . There is before God, strictly speaking, no such thing as granting a divorce. The Church or the government can merely state the fact, established by competent witnesses, that a marriage has been deliberately disrupted by one or both of the contracting parties, either by adultery or by malicious desertion; it cannot grant permission to break the marriage tie.” (Commentary on Matthew, p. 104.)

R.C.H. Lenski agrees with these words when he writes “Jesus is not expounding Deut. 24:1, but Exodus 20:14 as quoted in (Mat.5) v.27. He is not setting up one cause for divorce over against the idea of many causes, but is forbidding all divorce and all causes for divorce as being against God’s intent as expressed in Exod. 20:14 . . . Jesus is not discussing the legal steps that may or may not be taken. Jesus does not legislate.” (Interpretation of Matthew, pp. 230-231.)

Whether or not the innocent party in a divorce may remarry without breaking the commandment of God bears more discussion.

The Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible translates Mat. 5:32 as follows: “But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries divorced woman commits adultery.” In a foot note to Mat. 19:9 the *Jerusalem Bible* says: “This exceptive clause (‘except it be for fornication’) does not mean that Jesus allows full divorce (i.e. with power to remarry) in cases of adultery. If this were so, he would be supporting the very concession he is criticizing. . . . Nowhere does he suggest what the solution (for cases of infidelity in marriage) is. This solution, which was not required at the time when full divorce was allowed, was destined to take shape in the Church and emerge as a ‘separation’ of the parties that carried with it no permission to remarry, cf. I Co. 7:11.” (*Jerusalem Bible*, N.T. pp. 45 & 47.)

In Rev. B. L. Conway’s *The Question* lox, we read:

“1. The Catholic Church never allows divorce (separation with the right to marry again) on the grounds of adultery because Christ absolutely forbade divorce with no exceptions (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18.)

...7. St. Jerome (340-420) writes: ‘As long as the husband is alive, even though he be an adulterer . . . and is deserted by his wife for his crimes, he is still her husband, and she may not take another.’

8. Catholic husband or wife, with prior permission of the Bishop, may simply separate from the party guilty of adultery. In rare instances, as a last resort, the Bishop may permit the injured party to obtain a civil

divorce. In all such cases, however, both parties remain truly married. Neither may carry again nor keep company with the opposite sex.” (pp. 205-20.)

The Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Canons 7 & 8, denied that adultery gives the innocent party permission to remarry. Is this Roman Catholic practice correct when compared with Matthew 5:32?

Our answer hinges on a correct analysis of the two verbs, *moicheuthenai* and *moichatai*. Lenski isolates the problem involved, “our helplessness” in translating these passive verb forms into English. “We have no passive corresponding to the active ‘to commit adultery.’ ...We must express the two passive forms as best we can to bring out the passive sense of the Greek forms. We attempt this by translating the infinitive ‘he brings about that she is stigmatized as adulterous,’ and the finite verb, ‘he is stigmatized as adulterous.’ ...It ought to be apparent that here we have essentially the same case that Paul treats in I Cor 7:15. The Jewish husband drives out his wife and thus disrupts his marriage. Both sever the marriage. Paul says, ‘the sister (or if the case be the reverse: the brother) is not under bondage,’ i.e., is free from the marriage which the ungodly spouse disrupted. ...It ought to be a great satisfaction to see that Paul and Jesus agree in every respect, and that Paul does not add anything to what Jesus said.” (*Interpretation of Matthew*, pp. 233, 234.)

The public stigma of adultery rests on the wronged spouse as soon as he or she is divorced; it doesn’t start only with remarriage to another partner. When one spouse breaks the marriage bond, the guilt rests on him alone; therefore his wronged spouse is *free*, and may stay with him, or divorce him and remarry, as she chooses.

The KJV and NASB translations cited above can be correctly understood only in the case of both spouses agreeing on a divorce for non-scriptural reasons. As Edward Koehler writes: “If any other reason, excepting reasons on Scriptural grounds, is the cause of divorce, adultery is committed, both by the complainant, in severing the marriage-tie, and by the accused that permits the dissolution on frivolous un-Scriptural grounds. ...He that marries a divorcee, one that has left her husband without Scriptural grounds, is guilty of adultery.” (*A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 1939, 1952, p. 290.)

Matthew 19:3

Kai proselthon auto Pharisaioi peirazontes auton kai legontes, “Ei exestin apolusai ten gunaika autou kata pasan aitian?”

Trans.: And (the) Pharisees came to him testing him and saying, Is it lawful (for a man) to release his wife for every charge?

Vocabulary

proselthon - *proserchomai* - Aor. A. Ind. 3P1. - come up, approach.

peirazontes - *peira(z)ō* - Pres. A. Part. - try; make trial of, test.

apolusai - *apoluo* - Aor. A. Inf. -loosen, set free; dismiss.

kata - Prep. + Acc. extent - because of; after.

(The words in () above are in a few texts, notably the Koine.)

Matthew 19:4

Ho de apokritheis eipen, “Ouk anegnōte hoti ho ktisas ap’ arches arsen kai thelu epoiesen autous,

Trans.: But he, answering, said, Haven’t you read that He who created (them) from the beginning made them male and female,

Vocabulary

apokritheis - *apokrinomai* - Aor. A. Part. - answer.

anegnōte - *anagnōskō* - II Aor. A. Ind. - recognize; read, recite.

ktisas - *ktizō* - Aor. A. Part. - to people, colonize; create.

Matthew 19:5

kai eipen, ‘Heneka toutou kataleipsei anthrōpos ton patera kai ten metēra kai kollethesetai tē gunaiki autou, kai esontai hoi duo eis sarka mian’?

Trans.: and he said, On this account a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall be bound to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh.

Vocabulary

kollethesetai - *kollaō* - Fut. P. Ind. 3s. - to glue; cleave to.

Matthew 19:6

Hōste ouketi eisin duo alla sarx mia. Ho oun ho theos sunezeuxen, anthrōpos mē chorizetō.”

Trans.: Wherefore they are no more tyro, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man divide.

Vocabulary

eisin - *eimi* - Pres. A. Ind. 3p1. - to be.

Ho - general and abstract neuter relative pronoun.

sunezeuxen - *sunzeugnumi* - Aor. A. Ind. 3s. - join together, yoke.

chorizetō - *chorizō* - Pres. A. Imperative 3s. - to part; sever.

In Matthew 19:3-6, the Pharisees from Perea ask Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” They ask this again thinking only of Deut. 24:1, where Moses permitted divorce when living together had become impossible. Jewish teaching on divorce at this time was divided. A conservative minority followed Rabbi Shammi, who taught that the only ground for divorce was conjugal infidelity. (In Moses’ day, actual adultery was punished by death, and that made divorces unnecessary.) The lax majority of the Jewish people followed Rabbi Hillel, who taught that anything displeasing to a husband was sufficient, and Rabbi Akiba, who allowed a divorce if a man found a more desirable wife.

Jesus answered the Pharisees on the basis of Genesis 1:27, and God’s words through Adam in Genesis 2:24. Matthew Henry summarizes Jesus’ reply: If husband and wife are united by the will of God, they are not to think lightly of separation. 1) For Adam to put away Eve would have meant putting away a part of himself. 2) If parents may not abandon children, then consider this, that marriage is an even closer union. 3) “One flesh” makes the marriage union equivalent to the perfect union that exists between two members of a body. (Matthew Henry on Mat. 19:3-12. p. 1299.)

Jesus declares, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man divide,” as the true meaning of the sixth commandment. Only death severs husband and wife, Rom. 7:2,3.

Matthew 19:7

Legousin autō, “Ti our Mōuses eneteilato dounai biblion apostasiou kai apolusai?””

Trans.: They said to him, Why, then, did Moses command to give (her) a divorce certificate and release (her)?

Vocabulary

eneteilato - *entello* - Aor. M. Ind. 3s. - command.

dounai - *didomi* - Aor. A. Inf. - give.

(The word “her” is included in many good manuscripts.)

Matthew 19:8

Legei autois, “Hoti Mōuses pros ten sklerokardian humōn epetrepsen humin apolusai tas gunaikas humōn; ap’ arches de ou gegonen houtos.”

Trans.: He said to them, “Moses, for your hardness of heart, permitted you to release your wives; but from the beginning it has not been thus.

(Phillips has a remarkable rendering: “It was because you knew so little the of the meaning of love that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives! But that was not the original principle.”)

Vocabulary

epetrepsen - *epitrepo* - Aor. b. Ind. - turn to; allow.

gegonen - *gignomai* - Perf. A. Ind. - become; happen.

Matthew 19:9

Lego de humin hoti hos an apoluse ten gunaika autou me epi porneia kai gamese allen moichatai.”

Trans.: And I tell you, that whoever divorces his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, is made adulterous.

Vocabulary

apoluse - apoluo - Aor. A. Subj. - loosen; dismiss.

me epi - followed by Dat. cause.

gamese - gameo - Aor. A. Subj. - marry.

moichatai - moichao - Pres. P. or M. Ind. 3s. - commit adultery.

(The additions to this text in some manuscripts, also in the KJV, are regarded by Nestle as insertions from Matthew 5:32.)

The Jews' attitude is evident when they ask, "Why did Moses *command*?" divorce. Our study of Mat. 5:31 has shown that this was really only permission granted, lest greater evil result. "For your hardness of heart" Moses allowed it, Jesus told the Pharisees. If we emphasize the word, *your*, we can conclude that among Jesus' true disciples there won't be such hardness of heart that leads to divorce. The *Jerusalem Bible* interprets: "You were so unteachable." Since Moses had to make a concession to the evil conditions of his time, anyone who wants to know about marriage must go back to Gen. 1:27 & 2:24, as Jesus did.

The verb, *moichatai*, in v.9, makes it clear that anyone who wrongfully divorces his spouse is an adulterer, and is made adulterous by his own sinful action. As such, it is self-evident that he cannot remarry without sin; marriage with someone else is what the Jews had in mind when they came to Jesus with their questions.

Bibliography

Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 1939.

Comment: On p. 287 of the revised edition, Koehler writes, "According to Matt. 5:32 and Matt. 19:9 one may not marry a person that is unlawfully divorced."

Carl F. Reuss, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage," printed in *Helping Families Through the Church*, ed. by O.E. Feucht, Concordia, 1971.

Comment: C.F. Reuss is executive director of research and social action, The American Lutheran Church. He writes, "Jesus spoke not one word by which a man or a woman might rationalize his divorce into a righteous act. ...Nevertheless, divorce is a reality, a consequence of human sinfulness. ...Experience shows that continuing cruel, calloused, or gross selfishness ... may set the stage for adultery, desertion, or divorce." (pp. 240-241.)

Reuss doesn't distinguish between "guilty" or "innocent" parties when he writes: "It may well be that a person who had the traumatic alienating experience of divorce needs desperately the love and companionship of a new marriage." (p.242.) The church doesn't attack the problem of divorce "through negative criticism, repressive legislation, or inflexible rules. Rather, ... the church seeks to be as understandingly evangelical as was the Lord with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:16-18)." (pp. 243-244.) Note: We must remember that Scripture is silent with regard to what Jesus finally said regarding this woman's right of remarriage.

Guy Duty, *Divorce and Remarriage*, Bethany Fellowship, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota. 1967.

Comment: For many years, this man believed the teaching that forbids remarriage to the proven-innocent party in divorce. Now he believes the opposite. This book is very good for reference material.

John H. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, Concordia, St. Louis, Mo., 1932•

Comment: Fritz has four pages on divorce reflecting conservative Lutheran teaching from Scripture. Of interest are these words on malicious desertion: “While the ‘rendering of due benevolence’ does not constitute the essence of marriage, yet it is included in the marriage vow and constitutes one of the purposes of marriage. Therefore its persistent refusal despite instruction and admonition must be considered to be equivalent to malicious desertion, I Cor. 7:1-5.” (p.183).

Theo. Laetsch, “Divorce and Malicious Desertion,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. III, no. 11-12., vol. IV, no. 1-3. 1932-193

Comment: This series of articles is the best that I found among periodicals, covering every aspect of divorce and remarriage.