

HATE, ADULTERY, AND DIVORCE: Matthew 5:21-32

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Introduction

Matthew 5:21-6:18 may be regarded as an outgrowth of the comment in 5:20 that people's righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Murder, adultery, divorce, and the lesser sins of anger (5:22a), hate, name calling (5:22b), revenge (5:38-42), and capricious oath taking (5:33-37) are all of the same sort: they depersonalize other people. Depersonalizing relationships can be done by

- (a) legalizing them.
- (b) externalizing them.
- (c) competing with them.

The competitive mentality that sets others at naught needs to be replaced by the Golden Rule that restates the Second Great Commandment. Self-centeredness and false individualism need to yield to interpersonalism as befits social relationship with God and other people.

The three forms of depersonalization are negative or at best neutral; the positive thrust comes from love.

I. Murder: lessons from 5:21-26 (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)

A. Not just restraint from the overt act, but from the inner attitudes (21-22a)

Jesus gets rid of unintended legalism in the interpretation of Old Testament texts. He reasons that the things which tend toward what is prohibited and things that are like what is prohibited are themselves also prohibited.

B. Not just restraint from the ultimate crime, but from similar lesser acts (22b)

Anger, hate, and verbal abuse like name calling have lesser degrees of the same nature as murder and may lead to it in the end.

C. Not just restraint from negative behavior, but positive effort at reconciliation (23-26)

Jesus advocates replacing the adversarial stance with a conciliatory one.

D. Vertical relationship cannot be divorced from horizontal relationship (23-24).

The principle here is illustrated elsewhere in the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant and in Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11.

E. Religious observance cannot be divorced from everyday relationships (23-26).

The vertical and the horizontal are governed by the same basic principles because they are of the same basic sort: interpersonal. Therefore, they must be tied together in practical righteousness for people who serve as a light to the rest of the world (5:14-15; cp. the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant).

II. Adultery: 5:27-30

A. Adultery is backed up to lust.

Jesus means looking to lust. In a sense, people are not able to avoid bodily drives, and there is nothing wrong with them as such. What he refers to, however, is deliberate attempts to create sexual arousal such as seeking out occasions and literature and pictures that can be directed toward the sex drive.

B. Adultery grows out of internal lust. Therefore, it must be dealt with by dealing with what leads to it: (a) eye control, (b) cloth control, (c) taking care of drives within their appropriate context (1 Corinthians 7:1-3).

III. Divorce: 5:31-32 (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

A. Structure of the text: two approaches to 5:27-32

1. Within the adultery framework: 5:31-32 as a sub-set of 5:27-32

In favor of this arrangement is the mention of adultery in 5:32, although the adultery is something the husband somehow “causes” his former wife to do.

a. The “legal adultery” approach

In this view Jesus objects to using divorce to accomplish what would otherwise have been adultery. Instead of going ahead and committing adultery with someone, the man divorces his wife and marries the other woman. The motivations behind such a procedure amount to the same thing as adultery; consequently, Jesus’ statements here about divorce fall within the category of adultery. He is not dealing with divorce as such, but divorce as driven by the same motivation that results in adultery. Divorce for avoiding an undesirable marriage situation without any predetermined prospect for remarriage falls outside the scope of Jesus’ teaching in this text. The contrast with Deuteronomy 24 (“*but I tell you*”) would consist of limiting what that legislation did not clearly forbid.

b. The betrothal approach

Jesus’ comments are for getting the Pharisees to see that general divorce is not meant by Deuteronomy 24; consequently, Moses did not mean divorce for any cause, but for

cases where the man wanted to end betrothal or where unfaithfulness in the bride was discovered after the marriage was consummated.

c. The incestuous-marriage approach

Jesus' comments again are for getting the Pharisees to see that Moses did not mean general divorce, but for a special situation—that of incestuous marriage.

These three viewpoints assume too limited a context for Deuteronomy 24, which Jesus would presumably be correcting. There are no contextual cues in Deuteronomy 24 to restrict Moses' words to a more limited framework than giving a writing of divorcement in any situation where the husband is repulsed by or dissatisfied with something in the wife. Likewise there are no contextual cues in Matthew 5 to restrict Jesus' words to what would stand in contrast to such specific situations. Besides, a parallel discussion in Matthew 19 records Jesus as saying that the Deuteronomy legislation was enacted because of the hardness of men's hearts. It would not necessarily seem hardhearted to divorce a woman who had misrepresented her virtue during betrothal.

2. Parallel to the adultery category: 5:31-32 as subsequent to 5:27-30

In favor of this arrangement is the recurrence of the formula "*It was said . . . but I say.*" Besides the parallel structure, the proximity of these comments on adultery and divorce are sufficiently accounted for by the fact that both practices represent something less than the ideal relationship God intends for men and women, especially since the motivation behind the latter can be the same as that behind the former—as noted above under "legal adultery."

B. Setting of the discussion: the assumed dispensational connections

1. *Within Mosaism*: the contrast within Mosaism is between civil code and moral issue—between the civil divorce law found in Deuteronomy 24 and the real nature of marriage indicated by Genesis 1-3 and Malachi 2:14-16. God hates divorce and considers the husband as dealing treacherously with his wife.

2. *Between Mosaism and the millennium*: the true Messianic kingdom will not be present until the millennium because the Jews rejected Jesus when he came the first time and so the church was parenthetically instituted meantime. Perfection is required at that time, the time to which the Sermon on the Mount applies. Meantime, during the parenthetical church age the perfect standard does not fully apply, and there is greater freedom from the perfection principle.

3. *Between Mosaism and Christianity*: Moses allowed divorce for any cause, but Christ allows divorce for adultery.

The dispensational setting seems immaterial, because the principles that govern marriage arise from the nature and purpose of marriage as a reflection of the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27). Dispensational distinctions do not apply to behavior that arises from the nature of the case; morality in general is non-dispensational. Even in the Mosaic age a distinction should have been made between Moses' civil code and God's moral intent; consequently, even if there will be a future political phase of the Messianic Kingdom on earth, the present church age already participates in the ideal of being perfect as God in heaven is perfect. People are to be like the God in whose image they are created male and female (Genesis 1:27).

C. Content

1. How “make her an adulteress”?

Calling the divorced woman an adulteress casts blame on her.

2. How “make her an adulteress”?

Saying that the husband makes her an adulteress casts blame on him.

a. *By the way “he used” her*: interestingly, the Greek infinitive about the woman's adultery is passive: “. . . ποιῇ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι.” The clause appears to be translatable as “*he causes her to be adulterated.*” Such a thing could be caused by putting her in a situation where she has to remarry (see below) or by speaking in terms of effect: he has lived with her and now sets her aside as a single woman who has nevertheless lived with a man.

b. *By treating her like an adulteress*: relative to God's real intention for marriage, there would be no divorce except for sexual impurity (5:32b). On this background, if a man does put away his wife, he implies that she has been unfaithful to him. The Greek verb ποιέω might carry the force here of *treat* (her like an adulteress) rather than *cause* or *make* (her an adulteress).

Both *using her* and *treating her as an adulteress* look backward for an explanation of why Jesus calls her an “adulteress.” The following two approaches look forward for an explanation of his terminology.

c. By exposing her to prostitution as her only means of support

Missionaries to polygamous cultures have sometimes attempted to eradicate the polygamy by having the converted husband discard all his wives except the first one. They discovered that their policy created a worse situation than the polygamy itself, because these women often had no means of support except through prostitution. A person wonders

whether a divorced wife in Judaism, however, would have necessarily been as exposed to such a condition; she could in all likelihood return to her father's house.

d. By her new marriage

The former husband causes her to commit adultery by putting her in a situation where she will, or will have to, remarry as a means of support. In support of this interpretation is (1) the statement that whoever marries the divorced woman commits adultery (5:32c; cp. 19:9c). Moreover, (2) in Matthew 19:9a the divorcing husband is said to commit adultery against his former wife when he remarries.

Makes her an *adulteress* seems to affirm two things in tension with each other, because it simultaneously implies blame on his part (*makes*) and hers as well (*adulteress*). In a situation like this the interpreter suspects that something is going on here beyond the first impression given of the words. For the present, however, the following observations seem clear.

D. The main point

In the teaching of Jesus divorce cannot occur without sin being assigned somewhere, either on the part of the divorced or the divorcing spouse. Herein lies the difference between Christianity and the civil marriage code of Mosaism. Legal guilt was not assigned to divorce, and no legal stigma accompanied it. Moses allowed divorce for any cause short of sexual immorality, which was a capital offense punishable by stoning. Theoretically under Jewish law there would have been no divorce for sexual unfaithfulness. A complicating practical factor in the first century was that the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out capital punishment, but in Matthew 5 (and 19) Jesus makes his presentation in terms of Mosaic legislation.

Presumably Jesus' presentation in Matthew 5 assumes the same guidelines he enunciated in Matthew 19, where he goes back before the law to created origins. He argues that the manner of creating man and woman, the situation God himself originally established and the teaching of Genesis 2:24, show God's intention for marriage. In fact, all New Testament teaching on men-women relationships—whether directed against fornication, temple prostitution, adultery, divorce, or role-relations in church processes—are referenced to this same creation account. The character of marriage lies in the nature of things, not in the law of things. It is not simply a matter of legally joining together a man and a woman; it is a matter of naturally doing so. To put it another way, ultimately God joins partners in marriage, not law. Human operation under law—including the Mosaic Law—should not contravene divine intent for the reality itself. “*What God has joined together [naturally] let not people put asunder [legally].*”

Theoretically in terms of the nature of marriage as intended by the creator, divorce and remarriage are essentially adulterous. The next study deals with whether practical

considerations and the redemptive principle can have any modifying effect on the divorce-remarriage problem.

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