

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 17: The Third Antithesis—Christ’s Teaching on Divorce

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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, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (Mt. 5:31-32).

In the third antithesis, our Lord continues His teaching on the proper interpretation and application of the seventh commandment with a discussion of fidelity in marriage or the abuse of divorce by the scribes and Pharisees and the sin of adultery that it causes. This is a very important topic in our day, when the universal passage of so-called “no fault” divorce laws have made a mockery of God’s sacred law and the institution of marriage. One of the greatest indications of our nation’s spiritual and ethical decline over the past few generations is both the great increase in our divorce rate (presently it is about 49%) and the passage of statutes that make divorce laws much more elastic, permissive and easy. When the western nations cast off their Christian profession and the fear of God, moral corruption in the sphere of sexuality quickly abounded. The great losers in this new narcissistic atmosphere have primarily been women and children. By way of introduction, there are some things we should note about this passage.

First, while the first two antitheses focused our attention on sins of the heart, this antithesis and the ones which follow discuss sinful acts. The scribes and Pharisees were not just guilty of ignoring the internal aspect of the law. They also interpreted laws related to outward deeds in such a manner as to make Jehovah’s law far more permissive than what it actually taught.

Second, the law that the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of perverting in this instance was a civil law in the Mosaic code relating to divorce: Deuteronomy 24:1ff. This judicial law permitted a man to divorce his wife if he “found some uncleanness in her.” The vast majority of Jews in Jesus’ day interpreted this to mean that a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason. It is important that we understand that Christ is not refuting or speaking against Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but is setting forth an antithesis to the predominant scribal distortion of this law. The point is proved by the introductory formula “it was spoken” (*errethe de*) which, as discussed above, indicates human oral traditions, not the Word of God. Further, as noted, it would be absurd for our Lord to emphatically state that He did not come to destroy the law and then turn right around and begin refuting it. The Redeemer is honoring the law of God and is displaying its amazing wisdom and its great fullness.

Third, the teaching of this passage on divorce is identical with Matthew 19:3-12, which was given much later during the Savior’s ministry. Since Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is a fuller discussion of the same topic, we would do well to look at the two passages together in order to shed light on our text. Matthew writes,

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" And he answered and said unto them, "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh'? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." They say unto him, "Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?" He saith unto them, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."

The Pharisaical Distortion

In order to understand the perversion of God's law in our text, we need to examine the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and determine how the Jews had twisted this civil law to their own ends. This Mosaic law on divorce reads,

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. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

This passage is a classic example of a biblical case law where certain conditions are set forth (i.e. "if this occurs") which become the basis for instructions and imperatives ("then do this"). The first condition is that the husband has no favor in his wife "because he has found some uncleanness in her." Note this "uncleanness" in the woman which causes the husband to no longer want his wife is *the only reason given* for a divorce in this passage. If this "uncleanness" occurs, the man is permitted to write her a certificate of divorce and send her out of the household. The second condition of this section of Scripture is given to set up a prohibition of remarriage (Dt. 24:4). If the woman who was divorced goes out and marries another man and he divorces her or dies, the first husband is not permitted to remarry her. Three reasons are given: she has been defiled; marrying her would be an abomination before the Lord; and, it would bring sin upon the land.

The vast majority of Jews in Christ's day interpreted the expression "found some uncleanness in her" as "if there is *anything* he finds undesirable in her." Consequently, men were divorcing their wives if they found a woman who was younger or more attractive. Interestingly, at that time there were two Jewish schools of thought on this issue. There was the school of Shammai who held to a very restricted interpretation of "uncleanness" in Deuteronomy 24:1. For Shammai "uncleanness" referred to sexual immorality or adultery. The school of Hillel, however, defined "uncleanness" as widely as possible. If she put too much salt on his food, or gained weight, or grew unattractive or spoke to him in a manner that was not respectful enough,

he could divorce her.¹ The Pharisees and the vast majority of men at that time were attracted to the interpretation of Hillel because of their sexual lusts. Their laxity came to expression in their question to Christ: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” (Mt. 19:3). The Pharisees wanted to know whose side Jesus was on concerning this issue. Did He hold to a very strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 or was He in line with the common practice of their culture?

All of this raises the question. Does Deuteronomy 24:1 (“some uncleanness”) justify the common Jewish understanding of divorce for any cause? Although the precise meaning of the phrase *erwat dabar* translated as “some indecency,” “some uncleanness,” “something indecent” is uncertain, it is very likely that it refers to sexual perversion or adultery for the following reasons. First, the phrase literally means “nakedness of a thing” or “a naked matter.” “The word uncleanness of a thing definitely implies a serious offense; it is used elsewhere of the shameful exposure of the body (Gen. 9:22; Ex. 20:26; Lam. 1:8; Ezek. 16:36, 37), in Leviticus 18 of illicit and abnormal sexual practices, and in Deuteronomy 23:14 for human excrement.”² Thus, this term would be perfect for describing sexual immorality. It would be an inappropriate expression to describe not being able to bear children or to designate a non-sexual offense. Second, the term nakedness is used as a metaphor for sexual intercourse twenty-three times in Leviticus 18 which deals specifically with forbidden sexual relationships. Indeed, this chapter is a catalogue of sexual sins. Third, the language used in Deuteronomy 24:4, “defiled,” clearly suggests a sexual offense of some kind. Fourth, if Deuteronomy is allowing divorce only for a serious sexual violation on the part of the wife, then we have a complete harmony between God’s law and the Redeemer’s exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. This point is important when we consider the fact that our Lord is not refuting, correcting or adding to the law in the Sermon on the Mount, but is giving the true meaning against scribal perversions. Therefore, Deuteronomy 24:1 does not justify divorce for any cause.

Those who reject the view that sexual immorality or adultery were in mind, do so on the basis that adultery was a death penalty offense. Thus they argue that the death penalty rendered divorce in such circumstances unnecessary. The problem with this view, which is common, is that it does not take into account the fact that there are instances when adultery is known to have taken place, but cannot be proven in a court of law. Jewish courts needed two or three witnesses to get a conviction and this was not always easy. For example, the woman caught in adultery in John 8 could not have been lawfully convicted under biblical law because the witnesses were corrupt, unqualified and thus disqualified (cf. Jn. 8:7-9). Further, it seems that in the case of adultery the death penalty was the maximum penalty under the law. Proverbs 6:35 speaks of the husband who refuses monetary recompense from the man who committed adultery with his wife. And there is the case of godly Joseph who, after discovering Mary was pregnant, “and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Mt. 1:18). Deuteronomy 24:1 teaches that a man who knows that his wife is committing adultery, but who does not have sufficient evidence for a civil trial, or who does not want to go through a trial, is free to divorce his unfaithful wife. However, once he does so, if she chooses a course of habitual adultery by marrying another man, he can never take her back. She is defiled before God.

¹ “The house of Hillel say, if she should spoil his food, (that is, as Jarchi and Bartenora explain it, burns it either at the fire, or with salt, *i.e.* over-roasts or over-salts it) who appeal also to Deut. xxiv.1. R. Akiba says, if he finds another more beautiful than her, as it is said, Deut. xxiv.1.” (Maimon and Bartenora in Gittin, c.9 sect. 10 as quoted in John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:48).

² Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 405.

The Savior's Teaching

If we combine Matthew 5:32 with 19:4-9, our Lord's rejection of the Pharisees' permissive doctrine on divorce is as follows.

First, Jesus appeals to the creation ordinance of marriage as a proof text against the Pharisees' "any cause" view of divorce. "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:4-5). By this appeal to Genesis, Christ is saying that: a) Marriage was instituted by God and thus is defined by Him. He makes the rules, not man. "It was God who made this union possible (Gen. 1:28). It was he, again, who said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help fit for him' (Gen. 2:18). It was also God who brought Eve to Adam, to be the latter's wife (Gen. 2:22). Indeed, from every angle, it was God who established marriage as a divine institution (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5, 6)."³ Therefore, those who mock this institution and treat it as nothing more than a romantic human invention, or a method of social control, that can be delayed for extended periods of fornication, or dissolved at will for any cause, mock the God who instituted it for our benefit.

b) Marriage was instituted and designed to be only between *one* man and *one* woman (the two have become one). The implication of this is that anything other than this, including homosexuality, polygamy and divorce, is the result of sin and the fall. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that God did not institute marriage so they could get a new wife every so often. One should no more get rid of his wife than cut off a limb. They are one flesh, not two.

c) Marriage was intended by God to be permanent. "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:6). Since God is the one who joins a man and a woman together in marriage, man has no right or authority to sever marriage unions unless God Himself says they can be severed. This was a stinging rebuke to the common practice of the Jews at that time. "In the time of Jesus divorce had grown easier and easier, so that a situation had arisen in which girls were actually unwilling to marry, because marriage was so insecure."⁴

Second, the Redeemer makes it clear that God did not command men to divorce their wives, but only permitted it because of the hardness of their hearts. "They said to Him, 'Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?' He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so'" (Mt. 19:7-8). Interestingly, the Pharisees' question reveals their perversion of what is actually said in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Moses did not order the Jews to divorce their wives. The only imperative in the whole passage is the one forbidding men to remarry their previous wives who had married another and then been divorced again or widowed. But the Pharisees saw in this Scripture a blank check to divorce their wives at will, for any cause. Jesus says this law was a concession to their sinful, hard hearts. We must keep in mind that this was a civil law designed by Jehovah to rein in an existing chaotic practice. Because the men had hard hearts, they were divorcing their wives for virtually any reason and replacing them with younger, prettier women. This is precisely the sin that Malachi 2:14-16 condemns. Before the giving of the law to Moses, men were already divorcing their wives. What

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 716.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:152.

God did was to radically limit the reason for divorce to a matter of nakedness or fornication. If followed, the law would have greatly reduced the number of divorces in their society. “All the various excuses which men had been using and bringing forward were now prohibited.”⁵ Our Lord then reminds the Pharisees, “from the beginning it was not so.” This divine law was necessitated by sin. However, God’s original plan was a *permanent* union between one man and one woman. The Savior once again rebukes the Pharisees for not interpreting Deuteronomy 24:1 in light of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.

Third, following the true interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, Jesus allows only one exception as a lawful reason for divorce—fornication. Any remarriage after divorce that is not on account of fornication renders all remarriages after divorce adultery.⁶ “But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery” (Mt. 5:32). “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Mt. 19:9). Regarding these passages there are a number of things to note.

These verses state teaching that is clear and easy to understand. “The English translation ‘whoever divorces his wife except for fornication and marries another commits adultery’ is accurate and gives a precise rendering of the original statement in the Greek text. The grammar and syntax of the verse are simple and not at all unusual.”⁷ In fact, everyone can understand precisely what these passages mean *immediately* unless they come to these passages with presuppositions that are contrary to it; that require exegetical gymnastics to make them teach what they obviously do not. This is particularly true of those schools of thought that believe divorce is not allowed under any circumstances, or those who do not allow remarriage under any circumstances.

Christ clearly allows remarriage for the innocent party in a divorce. Those who believe that divorce is allowed by this passage, but who claim that all who remarry are guilty of adultery, have violated the grammar of the Greek text. Our Lord says that the one who divorces his wife *who does not have fornication as his reason* and then remarries another is guilty of adultery. This means that the man whose wife is unfaithful and has attacked the marriage bond through adultery, not only has the God-given right to divorce his wife, but also to marry again. “According to this law, adultery is the only sufficient reason of divorce. He who for any other cause puts away his wife, is to be held an adulterer if he marry another woman; and she, by marrying him, commits adultery; while at the same time, he becomes the guilty occasion of adultery, if the woman, who is still his wife, marry another man; for in this case she commits adultery, as he also does who marries her.”⁸ “The interpretation that this verse allows divorce, but not remarriage, is not merely improbable, it is grammatically impossible.... This verse definitely indicates that someone who divorces due to the exception and then marries another

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:256.

⁶ A discussion of desertion and divorce is beyond the scope of our text (see 1 Cor. 7:15 and the Westminster Confession 24:6 which reads, “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage; wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it, not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.”)

⁷ Thomas R. Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion” in H. Wayne House, Editor, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 156.

⁸ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 7:199.

does not commit adultery. The exception is a real exception which allows for a genuine divorce so that the person may marry another.”⁹

It is important to establish the meaning of *porneia*, translated as fornication or sexual immorality, because this word has been used to support some innovative, but unbiblical, interpretations of these passages. After we define this word we will interact with the most popular erroneous interpretations of this word.

The word *porneia* occurs 26 times in the New Testament and is always translated as *fornication* in the KJV. Many modern translations have adopted the translation “sexual immorality” because the word has many shades of meaning all related to unlawful sexual behavior of some kind. Therefore, the context should be used to determine if the word is being used in a specific manner. A number of times the word is used to refer to sexual sins that do not necessarily include adultery (e.g., prostitution, Rev. 2:14, 20; sexual relations between unmarried people, Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:1; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; sexual immorality in general, Jn. 8:41; Ac. 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; 2 Cor. 6:17; 12:21; Eph. 5:3). Sometimes the word is used interchangeably with adultery. This is the case in Matthew 5:32; 19:9 and Revelation 2:20-22. Moreover, *porneia* “is derived from *porne*, a prostitute, without specifying whether she (or her client) is married or unmarried. Further, it is used in the Septuagint for the unfaithfulness of Israel, Yahweh’s bride, as exemplified in Hosea’s wife Gomer.”¹⁰ “[I]n Ezekiel xvi, 25-28, the wife of Jehovah is said to commit *both* sins.”¹¹ Since *porneia* is a comprehensive word that covers all kinds of sexual immorality, including adultery, and since the context of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is marriage, it makes perfect sense to regard it in these contexts as “adultery” or “marital unfaithfulness.” Some scholars have speculated that the word *porneia* is used instead of adultery (*moicheia*) because the marriage covenant can be broken by a whole variety of perverse sexual practices (e.g., homosexuality, bestiality, incest, etc.).

Having briefly examined the meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, we need to consider a few wrong interpretations of Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage, which hinge on a unique understanding of *porneia*. One view that has become popular among Roman Catholic and a few evangelical scholars is that *porneia* refers not to some act of fornication or adultery, “but rather to the specific problem of incestuous marriage, i.e., marriage within the forbidden degrees stipulated in Lev. 18:6-18.”¹² It is argued that this is how the word fornication is used in 1 Cor. 5:1 which describes sexual relations between a man and his father’s wife. If this very narrow definition of fornication is accepted, then a divorce is only permitted in the case of a marriage that was unlawful or illicit to begin with. Therefore, a man who was lawfully married could not divorce his wife even if she repeatedly committed adultery. This view is becoming increasingly popular with those who believe in no divorce and no remarriage.

The incest theory suffers from a number of insurmountable problems. (1) The rules against incest or what today are called laws of consanguinity were so well known by the Jews that incest was essentially non-existent in Jewish society. Would the Savior bring up an issue that had no direct relevance to His first century Jewish audience? For this reason, modernist scholars who like the incest interpretation believe that the exception clause was a later addition to the gospel for the sake of Gentile converts. Such a view must be emphatically rejected because it is a

⁹ Thomas Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” 157, 159.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 97.

¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 93.

¹² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 10-13*, 124. This interpretation has made its way into the translation of the NJB [i.e. the Roman Catholic *New Jerusalem Bible*]: ‘except for the case of an illicit marriage’ (so too, 19:9)” (Ibid).

denial of biblical inerrancy. Furthermore, if incest was a problem for Gentile converts and not for Jews, then why would the exception clause be omitted in Mark's account which was written to a primarily Gentile audience and put in Matthew, which was written for a Jewish audience? This theory simply does not make any sense either exegetically or historically. (2) The prohibited relationships in Leviticus 18:6-18 would never be regarded by a Jew as a lawful marriage to begin with. After the revelation of the divine law, an incestuous marriage would be regarded as no more lawful or real than a homosexual marriage. Such marriages, when detected, would immediately be declared null and void. That which is not only sinful but against nature would never be recognized as a true, lawful marriage union. Consequently, those who hold this interpretation of the exception clause are involved in a blatant self-contradiction. They essentially are arguing that the only ground for breaking the covenantal union of marriage is that the covenantal union never really existed to begin with. According to the incest interpretation the word divorce should not even appear in our text.

(3) Further, if one accepts the incest interpretation, then our Lord's teaching in this place would be radically different. First, the comparison between the first marriage of Adam and Eve would be inappropriate for that was a holy, lawful union while incest is not. Second, the Savior would not be speaking of only one guilty party because both parties would be involved in an extremely serious, defiling sin. Third, our Lord would not be giving permission to the innocent party to get a divorce, but would be commanding both people involved to immediately break off this disgusting, illicit relationship. The incest interpretation does not fit this passage at all. It makes no sense whatsoever. In addition, the teaching in Matthew 5:31-32 is given to correct the scribes' and Pharisees' false interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. No one argues that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is dealing with the problem of incestuous marriages. As noted above, this passage is dealing with the Jewish abuse of divorce and is restricting it to one cause, a matter of nakedness or fornication. The incest interpretation completely ignores the fact that Jesus is expositing on the true meaning of an existing statute.

(4) The chief proof text for *porneia* as incest in this passage, 1 Corinthians 5:1, is not even dealing with illicit marriage but with fornication between two unmarried, but related, parties. Paul mentions the incest to note the extremely serious nature of this sin.

(5) As to the objection that our Lord would have used the word *moicheia* (adultery) instead of *porneia* (fornication) if typical adultery was in mind, we have already seen that fornication is a broad term that can be used to describe adultery.

(6) Finally, it needs to be pointed out that the whole Romanist presupposition behind the incest argument that marriage is indissoluble, that divorce and remarriage is always wrong, *contradicts* the incest argument. As Thomas Edgar notes,

If *porneia* refers to incest, then instead of an invalid marriage, incest on the part of the wife is the exception and becomes an acceptable basis for divorce in a valid marriage. This would not only disprove the concept of indissoluble marriage, but once the concept of indissoluble marriage is abandoned it would be highly illogical to select such an isolated meaning for *porneia* when other common meanings such as "adultery" would fit. It would also be illogical to allow divorce in a real marriage for incest and yet reject adultery as a grounds. The "incestuous marriage" position depends on the fact that *porneia* refers to an invalid marriage. However, there is insufficient evidence to establish that *porneia* was ever used to refer to an incestuous

marriage, or that any of the hearers would have understood it to carry that meaning in Matthew 19:9.¹³

In other words, once it is argued that those engaged in incest have a valid marriage, then their whole argument logically descends into the idea that incest is simply worse than adultery, for the incestuous marriage cannot be simultaneously valid and invalid at the same time. Since adultery is a death penalty offense, it will be virtually impossible to single out incest as somehow a more legitimate reason for divorce than adultery. The whole incest argument rests upon a number of presuppositions that are never proven and positions that are self-contradictory and inconsistent with Scripture.

Another popular argument designed to eliminate the exception clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is that the word “fornication” refers not to marriage itself, but only to the betrothal period before the marriage.¹⁴ In other words, if you are officially betrothed to marry a woman and you discover that she has been unfaithful, then you can divorce her and end the betrothal. But once you get married, you cannot divorce your wife for any cause, even if she repeatedly commits adultery. This position holds that the betrothal period is dissoluble while marriage itself is indissoluble. The betrothal unfaithfulness position was popularized in fundamentalist circles by Bill Gothard. This view is disproved by the following considerations.

(1) A study of Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-10 both make it very clear that our Lord is not discussing the betrothal period at all, but marriage itself. Note the following reasons. First, in Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus is discussing the proper interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. The Deuteronomy passage has nothing to do with the betrothal period and everything to do with real marriage. Second, Christ appeals to Adam and Eve’s marriage in the beginning to rebuke the Pharisees’ lax understanding of divorce. The Savior’s appeal to marriage itself and the fact that

¹³ Thomas Edgar, “Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” 180-181.

¹⁴ Those who hold to the betrothal theory have two basic exegetical arguments for their view. The first is the example of Joseph who was going to put Mary away (i.e. officially end the betrothal) secretly when he believed she was unfaithful (Mt. 1:19). This argument fails to prove anything when we consider that unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was a death penalty offense just like the penalty for adultery during marriage. Since the Romans did not allow the death penalty for adultery in the days of Jesus, divorce was the only option during betrothal and marriage. This passage does not demonstrate that divorce for adultery during marriage is wrong. It simply proves that unfaithfulness was also a legitimate biblical reason to break off a betrothal. The second argument is based on the fact that Matthew, writing to Jews, includes the exception clause while Mark, writing to a predominantly Gentile audience, omits it (cf. Mk. 10:11-12). The idea behind this argument is that Matthew includes it for Jews because they had a particular view of betrothal that was much stronger than a Gentile concept of engagement. The problem with this view is: a) Bible-believing Christians must regard the longer version in Matthew as the words actually spoken by the Savior. The idea of various authors redacting material or adding their own words to it is an implicit rejection of biblical inerrancy. b) Mark is noted for giving abbreviated accounts. The fact that Mark left the exception clause out does not mean there is no exception. Moreover, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is clearly directed to the disciples of the kingdom that Christ is establishing. It is for the New Covenant era, not just the Old. “To attempt to derive a position on Matthew 19:9 based on the recipients of Matthew or Mark is equivalent to reading Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in a modern high school book and then attempting to determine the actual content, meaning and significance of Lincoln’s original speech by the fact that the historians reproduced it for modern teenagers” (Thomas Edgar, 167). While the audience may influence terms used or the choice of materials, it cannot affect the original teaching. c) If Jesus were making a point about the importance of the betrothal period, it would still apply to Gentile Christian engagements as it does to Jewish betrothals, for a covenant bond establishes both. d) All of this is of no consequence anyway because above we have already established beyond a shadow of doubt that the Pharisees and Jesus are discussing marriage, not the betrothal period. People who hold this position are grasping after straw.

Adam and Eve were one flesh would be out of place in a discussion of betrothal, where the man and woman had not yet left their parents' homes and had not yet become one covenantally, sexually or socially. Third, the Pharisees' question was about marriage and not the betrothal period. It would have been absurd for the Redeemer to ignore their question and discuss the betrothal period instead of marriage. Since Christ and the Pharisees, as well as all the passages cited (Gen. 2:24; Deut. 24:1-4), *refer to real marriage* we must regard the betrothal argument as a presupposition that is imposed on the exception passages. Furthermore, our Lord was correcting a common abuse in Israel at that time (i.e. getting rid of older wives to replace them with younger, more attractive women. Indeed, this practice was as widespread in ancient pagan nations as it is today.) There is no evidence that breaking off betrothals or unfaithfulness during the betrothal period was a problem at that time at all. Why would the Redeemer take the time to bring up such an obscure topic when the real problem in ancient Israel was divorce from one's wife for any cause?

(2) The idea that the betrothal period could not be broken by mutual consent unless fornication occurred does not make any sense whatsoever once we understand what the betrothal period entailed. The betrothal is simply an agreement between parties to get married in the future. While it is certainly more than our frivolous modern engagements, it must not be confused with actual marriage. Even with a betrothal agreement, if the actual marriage never took place and the union was never consummated covenantally, sexually or socially, then there is no biblical reason why the parties could not back out of the agreement as long as they get consent from everyone involved. The woman would retain her virginity and would still be a desirable candidate for marriage with a different man. If we accept the betrothal interpretation of the exception clause, then the woman would still be forced to marry the man even if it was discovered that he was a habitual liar or had committed fraud or had a serious, incurable disease. Such a position is both unjust and unreasonable. Further, if the people who held this position were consistent they would not allow Christians who were engaged to break off the engagement unless it was established that one of the parties had committed fornication.

(3) Those that hold the betrothal viewpoint are in the unenviable position of arguing that betrothal and marriage are alike and different at the same time. The major premise of their argument is that betrothal and marriage are the same and that the parties involved are already regarded as husband and wife. But in order to make the point that marriage is indissoluble and can never end in divorce under any circumstance, they have to argue that betrothal is not the same and is less binding than marriage. This is an internal contradiction. If the betrothal period is the same as marriage, then why do the betrothed man and woman have to have a public ceremony and get married? Also, why does the exception clause not also apply to the marriage itself? "If betrothal were as binding as marriage, the exception would also apply to marriage."¹⁵ Their presuppositions cancel each other out.

(4) The disciples' response to the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 by itself completely refutes the betrothal theory. "His disciples said to Him, 'If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry'" (Mt. 19:10). The word translated "marry" (*gameo*) always refers to an actual marriage and is never used to describe a betrothal in the whole New Testament. The noun refers to a wedding while the plural refers to a wedding feast (cf. Mt. 22:2, 4, 9). This means that the disciples whom Jesus was addressing understood the Savior to be speaking about marriage, not betrothal. If Christ were speaking about betrothal, then He would have corrected

¹⁵ Ibid, 173.

the apostles' statement in verses 11 and 12. But He accepts their understanding as accurate. The betrothal theory is totally unbiblical.

(5) The absurdity of the betrothal interpretation is driven home when we examine what this view would actually mean. To see this, let us substitute the word "betrothed" for the word "wife." "Whoever divorces his *betrothed*, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" (Mt. 19:9). What this means is that a man who is engaged, who for some reason other than sexual immorality calls off the wedding (e.g., he discovers his betrothed has a serious gambling problem and is 200,000 dollars in debt) can never ever get married his whole life without committing adultery. He must either marry the woman or remain a virgin the rest of his life. Such a man would be condemned to be single permanently, even though he has not even been married once. In addition, what if the Christian man who is engaged discovers his fiancée has been lying and is not even a Christian? Since she is not guilty of fornication, must he marry her to avoid being single the rest of his life? Those who hold to the betrothal interpretation of the exception clause, in their zeal to forbid divorce in marriage for any cause, have obviously not carefully thought their position through.

f) An objection that applies to the incest interpretation as well as the betrothal view is that it is unjust to penalize the innocent party the rest of his or her life for the infidelity of another. Pink writes,

Surely the very idea is repugnant to all who are really acquainted with the Divine goodness and mercy. Why, if an innocent man upon a divorce is not then at liberty to marry again, he is deprived of his right by the sin of another, which is against the very law of nature; and on such a supposition it lies within the power of every wicked woman to deprive her husband of his natural right. The right of divorce in case of adultery, specified by Christ, for the innocent party to make use of, is evidently designed for his liberty and relief; but on the supposition that he may not again marry, it would provoke a snare and a yoke to him, for if thereon he has not the gift of continence, he is exposed to sin and judgment.¹⁶

It is important to recognize that adding to God's Word and attempting to be wiser and stricter than God is just as sinful as detracting from Scripture and relaxing God's standard. In our society of no fault divorce where the divorce rate among professing Christians is only slightly lower than the surrounding heathen culture, we understand the desire to restrain this evil practice. But when the Son of God interpreting His own divine law allows an exception for adultery, we must submit to His wisdom and authority.

Further, the no divorce position has led to many unintended evil consequences. For example, the woman who cannot divorce and remarry that gets venereal disease from her whore-mongering husband and the godly husband who cannot protect his children and move on with his life because he is forced to stay with a satanic, adulterous witch. There are times when divorce is not only permitted by God, but is the proper, godly thing to do. If a marriage partner commits adultery and repents and seeks a genuine reconciliation, then forgiving that person and staying married is a good thing. But if the adulterer refuses to repent, staying with him or her is dangerous spiritually, physically and emotionally. Having children and a family with such a person would be idiotic. God who is merciful and longsuffering finally gave wicked Israel a bill of divorcement and married another—the multinational New Covenant church (Mt. 21:43).

¹⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 95.

The Evil Consequences of Unlawful Divorce

To emphasize the wickedness of the scribes and Pharisees' lax teaching on divorce and remarriage, our Lord warns His disciples of the consequences of divorce for any cause. Thus He introduces the shocking idea that everyone who is not divorced because of fornication is guilty of committing adultery when they marry again. The man who puts his wife away causes her to commit adultery (Mt. 5:32). "The husband who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery because in the culture of that day, unlike ours, a single woman could hardly survive on her own, except through prostitution."¹⁷ "The Greek, by using the passive voice of the verb, states not what she becomes or what she does but what she undergoes, suffers, is exposed to."¹⁸ The point the Savior is emphasizing is the great evil the woman suffers because of the man's unlawful divorce. The wicked, hard-hearted husband exposes his innocent wife to adultery and hardship. "Note, Those who lead others into temptation to sin, or leave them in it, or expose them to it, make themselves guilty of their sin, and will be accountable for it."¹⁹ Further, any man who marries a woman who is put away unlawfully also commits adultery (Mt. 5:32; 19:9). In addition, the man who divorces his wife without the proper cause of adultery on her part becomes an adulterer if he ever remarries (Mt. 19:9). Any woman who married him would also be guilty of adultery. Those who reject the teaching of Christ and get divorced for any cause will enter into unions which are not blessed by God, but are sinful adulterous relationships. The lax teaching on divorce and remarriage by the scribes and Pharisees resulted in a society full of adulterers. Thus, our Lord repeatedly referred to His own nation as "an evil and adulterous generation" (Mt. 12:39; 16:4; Mk. 8:34).

Given the Redeemer's teaching on divorce and remarriage, there are a number of applications that we need to keep in mind. First, the strictness of Jesus' teaching is designed to promote the good and happiness of the family and society in general. The husband and wife are one and can never be severed in this life except in the case of adultery. This teaching forces husbands and wives to stay together, learn to love one another and to solve problems instead giving up and fleeing the marriage relationship. It is for this reason that serious Christians have the best, happiest marriages. The heathen attitude which views marriage in a selfish, hedonistic manner leads to divorce and chaos. The easy way out is chosen over hard work and the result is great unhappiness and damaged children.

As Christians we should meditate on the importance of marriage, on the oneness of our relationship and the significance of our duties. We should reflect on the intimate connection that God Himself has placed us in and thus strive to be of one heart and mind. We must carefully guard against all unfriendly thoughts, ill feelings or unnecessary disputes as we regard our spouses as more important than ourselves. We should studiously avoid unjust anger, irritating language and disrespectful speech with our husbands or wives. We must learn to bear each other's faults. Knowing that we will be together the rest of our lives, we must be forbearing, forgiving and conciliatory with each other. As John Brown writes,

Let them, in fine, live together as heirs of the grace of life, as those who know that death, the only cause of separation, will ere long cut the otherwise indissoluble bond; and let them seek to be bound together by a tie, which even death cannot dissolve,—even the faith of the same truth,

¹⁷ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 125.

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 306.

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:62.

the love of the same Saviour, the hope of the same salvation. Thus will they spend a happy lifetime together on earth: thus will they spend a happy eternity together in heaven.²⁰

Second, those believers who are preparing for marriage and seeking a mate should do so soberly and carefully. Marriage is a life commitment. Therefore, it must not be entered into lightly. Only those Christians who are serious about godliness, who are committed to promoting the Reformed faith, who are clearly dedicated to Jesus Christ, should be considered for marriage. Don't be deceived by looks, or money or empty promises. Choose carefully for the glory of God and the good of the Kingdom.

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²⁰ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:200.