

Chapter 10. Matthew 5

As promised some pages ago, we now need to interpret the words of Christ in light of what we've learned from Paul. We need to avoid the temptation to treat Paul as less worthy of respect than Christ. Rather, the Bible does not contradict itself, and 1 Corinthians 7 teaches what it teaches. We can't ignore its words to force a presumed conclusion on it.

And so, we turn to the Sermon on the Mount.

Matt. 5:27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' *28* But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. *29* If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. *30* And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' *32* But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' *34* But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; *35* or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. *36* And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. *37* Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' *39* But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. *40* And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. *41* If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. *42* Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' *44* But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *45* that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. *46* If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? *47* And if you greet only your brothers,

what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This quotation is perhaps too long, but it's for a point. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is addressing Jews who are under the Law of Moses. And Jesus goes through several familiar teachings in the Law of Moses and shows how the Law had been misinterpreted in then current society.

Moses never taught "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Rather, Moses taught "Love your neighbor" (Lev. 19:18). But this plain teaching had been distorted and perverted in the First Century. Jesus called his listeners back to the original meaning of the command.

In each case, Jesus was neither adding to nor taking away from the Law. He was rather showing how Moses' teachings should have been understood. Ultimately, Jesus' point was to show how people in the coming Kingdom of Heaven were being called to live—to a standard anticipated by the Law and the Prophets but not fully realized until the coming of the Christ (Matt. 5:17-20).

The key point here is that Jesus is not legislating new laws in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not come to do that. Rather, Jesus came to free us from law.⁶³

So let's now focus on Jesus' instruction on divorce—

31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

Plainly, Jesus' point is something like this: Moses taught you not to commit adultery—but you divorce your wives and think that this avoids violating the marriage covenant. But I tell you that the divorce itself violates the marriage covenant as much as adultery does—because after you put your wife away, neither you nor she can keep the covenant that you made!

Recall that Jesus is interpreting Deuteronomy 24, which states:

Deut. 24:1 If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes

⁶³ *Eph. 2:8-9* "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."; *Rom. 3:27-28* "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

The Jewish rabbis disputed over the meaning of this passage, and the disagreement was well known in Jesus' day. First, notice that the primary point of the passage is to deny a husband the right to remarry his wife after he has put her away and she has married another man.

Almost incidentally, Moses refers to the first divorce as being based on "something indecent" about the wife. The second divorce is because the husband "dislikes her." The rabbis debated whether divorce was permitted only due to some indecency or due to merely disliking the wife. The meaning of "something indecent" is much debated, even today.

Jesus clearly takes the more conservative position, saying the standard is fornication, very likely Jesus' interpretation of "something indecent."⁶⁴ He is not making new law.

But as shown by the context, Jesus is also addressing the Ten Commandments, and concludes that Moses was indirectly addressing "Thou shalt not commit adultery" in this passage.

⁶⁴ "Fornication" includes any sexual immorality, such as incest, prostitution, adultery, or homosexuality. The exact meaning of "fornication" in this context has been hotly disputed. Another intriguing possibility is that it refers to marriages that would be illegal or terminable under the Law of Moses, such as incestuous marriages or marriage by an Israelite to a foreigner contrary to the Law of Moses. Thus, the exception would refer primarily to what we'd call grounds for annulment, where the marriage not only should never have taken place but also should not be continued. This would accord with Ezra 10:10-11, where Ezra required the Jews to divorce their foreign wives, married contrary to the Law. The New Jerusalem Bible translates: "But I say to you, Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of an illicit marriage, makes her an adulteress ..." See Gary D. Collier, RM-Bible discussion group, <http://moses.acu.edu/RM-Bible> (April 15, 1996).

In *The Complete New Testament Word Study Dictionary*, Zodhiates states that the Greek word (*porneia*) translated fornication "may also refer to marriages within the degrees prohibited by the Law of Moses and generally to all such intercourse as prohibited in that Law." This interpretation has the advantage of reconciling Ezra with Jesus, explaining why Jesus makes "fornication" a special exception when any termination of the marriage covenant can end a marriage, and why Paul didn't refer to fornication as an exception in 1 Cor. 7.

Finally, this interpretation means that Jesus is not choosing between rabbinical schools of thought but is rather declaring all marriages properly entered into sacred and not to be broken for any reason—such that breaking a proper marriage is sin, the moral equivalent of adultery. This places Jesus very much in line with Paul.

Unfortunately, while the meaning is possible, it seems unlikely that Jesus' audience would have understood "fornication" in exclusively these terms. They would have instead thought in terms of sexual sin, which was the usual meaning of the term and entirely consistent with the context where Jesus was discussing Deuteronomy 24. Hence, this argument is clever but almost certainly wrong.

If a man divorces his wife to marry another woman, then he's committed adultery with the other woman in his heart long before he puts his first wife away. He is, therefore, an adulterer. Moreover, if a man "puts away" his wife by breaking his marriage vows, he is a covenant breaker, and hence an adulterer.

As God hates divorces and wants his disciples to honor their covenants, he expects divorced couples to reconcile whenever possible, just as Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 7:11. Although a couple is divorced, they are still bound by their covenant and should honor it if possible by reconciliation and repenting of the sin that led to the divorce.

However, if the wife remarries, she makes reconciliation impossible. Moreover, so does her new husband. Both have made it impossible for the couple to reconcile. In fact, once the second marriage occurs, reconciliation can never happen without violating Deuteronomy 24. Hence, the second marriage makes the first covenant impossible of performance. And covenant breaking is adultery.

This, I think, is at least the heart of Jesus' point. Remarriage is not sin (Paul said so), but remarriage that prevents a possible reconciliation is. Of course, not all marriages have any hope of reconciliation, but many do. Therefore, it is very unwise, even wrong, to quickly remarry after a divorce. Marriages "on the rebound" are notoriously unlikely to work, and they often occur before any serious effort can be made to work through the problems that led to the first divorce.

After all, divorces happen for reasons, and sometimes the reason is that the divorcing spouse has ungodly attitudes or other issues that will cause the second marriage to fail as well. From a pastoral standpoint, the parties to a divorce should be honest and vulnerable enough to do some self-discovery before entering into another marriage. They may well find that once they learn the causes of the first divorce, they can reconcile. Or even if reconciliation is unrealistic, they'll make a much better second marriage.

I should also add that Jesus should by no means be read as denying the Exodus 21:10-11 grounds for divorce. They were not controversial in his day, and when rabbis declared that divorce may be had only for adultery, their listeners understood that the Exodus 21:10-11 grounds for divorce were also allowed. It's how rabbis spoke.

Hence, if a husband fails to provide his wife with material support or emotionally neglects her, she has grounds for divorce. Abandonment, abuse, and such are clearly grounds for divorce. Jesus by no means contradicts this doctrine. Rather, when a husband or wife neglects his or her spouse, he or she is violates the marriage covenant.

Moreover, as the right of remarriage was the assumed result of a divorce, Jesus' listeners would not have assumed Jesus denied such a right. They should have understood that remarriage was in some sense wrong, but they wouldn't have concluded that remarriage was impossible.

Therefore, Jesus' words are much more consistent with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and 1 Corinthians 7 than we often assume. He is speaking as a rabbi and

making the point that literal compliance with the Law of Moses is woefully insufficient to truly fulfill God's will. He is not legislating and not really changing anything. He's just explaining what's always been true. Husbands and wives are to love each other and keep their covenants to each other. When they don't, they're covenant breakers and they cause others to become covenant breakers.

The fact that "adultery" is a metaphor for covenant breaking can be seen from verse 32, as well. Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." The wife is called an adulterous *even if she doesn't remarry*.

How can a woman who hasn't remarried be guilty of adultery? Some commentators assume that, being single, she must remarry or else become a prostitute, but that's just not true.⁶⁵ However, Instone-Brewer provides ample evidence that many divorced women did not remarry and had sufficient resources to live well as single women.⁶⁶ In fact, the Gospels support this view. Mary Magdalene, for example, was an unmarried, chaste woman. The same is true of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not divorced, but was evidently a widow who had no need to remarry. Therefore, we have to accept that Jesus didn't assume all divorced women would remarry and so is including unmarried, chaste women in what he says. And that means "adultery" is a metaphor for covenant breaking. Otherwise, it would make no sense at all to say that you make a woman an adulteress by divorcing her.

Now, I should add one more argument. Edwards quotes Carroll Osburn, one of the Churches of Christ's premier Greek scholars:

Thus it cannot be said that the present indicative in Matt. 19:9, or any other Greek text, "cannot mean other than continuous action," for any such argument blatantly disregards the several idiomatic uses of the present indicative in which continuity is not explicit. Greek syntax requires that each occurrence of the present indicative be understood in terms of its context to determine whether continuity is involved.⁶⁷

Now review the context. Take Matthew 5:32, for example:

⁶⁵ For example, D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew chapters 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publ. House, 1995), says at 152, "This arises out of the fact that the divorced woman will in most circumstances remarry (esp. in first-century Palestine, where this would probably be her means of support)." Carson is a brilliant commentator, but the Gospels are filled with adult, single women who show no sign of needing a husband to make a living—or of prostituting themselves. It is very unlikely Jesus was thinking along these lines given how many of his circle were women meeting precisely this description.

⁶⁶ Instone-Brewer, pp. 124-125.

⁶⁷ Carroll Osburn, "The Present Indicative in Matt. 19:9," 24 *The Restoration Quarterly* no. 4, (Restoration Quarterly Corporation, Abilene, TX 1981), p. 193.

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery

In this passage, “divorces” clearly occurs at a single point in time. “Marries” is clearly a point-in-time verb. The context for “commits adultery” strongly argues for point-in-time action. And if the action is point in time, then the “adultery” must occur at the time of the divorce. That is, “adultery” is the breaking of the covenant of marriage.

We will consider these verb tenses further when we get to the present-tense argument.

Therefore, we already see several reasons for taking “commit adultery” as a metaphor for covenant breaking—

- This sense makes the passage consistent with Paul’s interpretation in 1 Corinthians 7.
- Only this interpretation is consistent with grace.
- The passage is in the midst of numerous metaphors and other figures of speech. Jesus plainly has a predilection for such language in the Sermon on the Mount. He no more means literal adultery than he means literal eye gouging.
- “Adultery” is frequently used as a metaphor for covenant breaking in both Testaments, even by Jesus.
- The woman can only be caused to commit adultery if adultery is covenant breaking. Her former husband does not *make* her have sex with anyone.
- The verb tenses strongly suggest that the adultery occurs when she is put away and, if she takes a new husband, when he marries her. Nothing is said about either continuing in sin. (This is true in English, too, if you read the passage without the Council of Trent’s interpretation in mind.)
- This meaning is consistent with the parallel portions of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus consistently looks beyond the words of the Law to the heart of the Law. The traditional interpretation makes us worse legalists than the Pharisees. The true interpretation calls us to avoid using the Law as a pretext for sin, which precisely parallel with the surrounding teachings..

We next turn to Matthew 19 to see if the same result holds true.