

TEACHING GOAL

To study the seventh commandment in relation to divorce.

DOCTRINAL STANDARDS

Q. Which is the seventh commandment?

A. The seventh commandment is, Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Q. What is forbidden in the seventh commandment?

A. The seventh commandment forbids all unchaste thoughts, words, and actions.

S.C. 72, L.C. 139, W.C. of F. XXIV, Savoy 25, Young 95-96

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Study Passage: Matthew 19:3-12

Support Passages: Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:2-12; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; I Corinthians 7:8-16;

BIBLE STORY

John 8:1-11; The woman taken in adultery

MEMORY ASSIGNMENT

"For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." (1 Corinthians 7:14, ESV)

APPLICATION

One of the greatest social evils today is divorce and in some areas of our nation nearly all marriages are terminated by it. The Scriptures teach that divorce is a monstrous evil and that marriage is not to be terminated for frivolous reasons, in fact "by nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can in no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate." (W.C. of F. XXIV) Though divorce is permissible, it is at best a necessary evil, a testimony to the fact that we live in a sinful world.

SUMMARY

A great deal of debate and misapprehension exists concerning the teaching of the Bible on divorce. This is obvious in the plethora of positions taken by modern commentators and writers. However the subject was difficult even in the early New Testament Church as seen in the textual problems concerning Matthew 19:9. For example, the ESV reads, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." With this agree the NIV and the RSV. However, the AV (King James) adds, "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." And there are other variations among the Greek sources but scholars at present generally agree with the text as translated by the ESV.

In this text Jesus answers a question put to Him by the Pharisees as a trap. They asked, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" And the Lord answered a resounding no! It is not lawful to divorce one's wife for any reason but one, namely, immorality (Gr. *porneia*). The foil against which Jesus reacted was the licentious, self-righteous practice of the Pharisees who, as one of their most unquestioned privileges, "claimed the right to repudiate a wife, after the lapse of years, and birth of children, for any caprice whatever."¹ The trap they laid for Christ consisted of compelling Him to either speak out against a widely held popular view or to substantiate their interpretation of the law. To do the one would debase His public image and to do the other would elevate the Pharisees' image. But Jesus clearly did not uphold the Pharisaical interpretation of the Mosaic statute given in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and furthermore cleared Moses from their perversions and actually repealed the statute by His authority as God. Quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus argued that divorce was never intended for those who were married but due to hardness of heart Moses permitted it. The one who commits adultery, according to verse 9, is the one who divorces for grounds other than adultery. The Westminster Confession correctly infers that the innocent party in such an improper divorce can marry again as if the offender were dead. Mark 10:11-12 simply includes the wife in the same principle, "-- and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." The passage in Matthew 5:32 does not teach that if the innocent party remarries, he or she commits adultery. This interpretation ignores the fact that *moichouthenai* (to be considered by others as adulterous) and *moichatai* (considered by others as adulterous) are passives. The subject of these passive verbs is the wicked husband who by improperly divorcing his wife causes her to be considered socially as an adulteress even though she is innocent. Not only has he injured her by committing adultery against her but he, by his immorality, causes her to be a social outcast. The one who marries the innocent party is also considered by society to be adulterous though he is innocent which further compounds the

heinousness of the improper divorce.² This is very clearly observed in modern Palestinian society.

As for the statute given in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, what is contemplated is not divorce for "any cause" as practiced by the Pharisees but simply the annulment of a poorly arranged marriage before consummation. In that ancient culture the bride and bridegroom typically had never been acquainted until the day of marriage. Consider the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca for example. It was to relieve the wretched fate of such a rejected woman that Moses law was framed. She could return to her single, eligible status again to be married properly albeit not to the man who previously rejected her.³

On the subject of wilful desertion as grounds for divorce we must study I Corinthians 7:8-16 but your attention is invited to the summary of Year 2 Lesson 34 which deals with this passage. So then, we who are married need to take special care to enhance and protect this holy relationship bearing in mind the Lord's will in the matter. From the beginning, divorce was never intended.

¹ Robert L. Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p. 408.

² R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Augsburg Publishing House, 1964, p. 230.

³ Dabney, op. cit., p. 409.