

Matthew 5:31-32

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Jesus closes a loophole that men used to exploit Moses's teaching on divorce.

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. A similar, but not quite parallel, of this teaching is described in Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:2-9.

Jesus set high standards for anger and moral purity. He also sets a high standard for marriage.

Biblical marriage is the union of *a man and a woman*. God instituted the first marriage covenant when He brought the *woman* to Adam. Adam named her Eve and they came together to unify the relationship and she became his *wife*. Together they became one flesh (Genesis 2:18-25). The marriage covenant is a picture of Christ's relationship with His bride, the church (Ephesians 5:28-29). As such, marriage is a holy and sacred relationship that is to depict God's relationship with us. Therefore "marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). Sadly, marriage is not always honored, and those who enter its covenant sometimes break its vows.

Jesus references the teachings of Moses concerning divorce. *It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away (Apolo, to send away), let him give her a certificate of divorce (Apostasion, to sever).'* Moses taught that when a man *sends his wife* out of his house he must *give her a certificate of divorce* verifying that she is no longer married to her husband. This certificate made the divorce official. It showed everyone that the woman who was sent *away* from her former husband was now available to be remarried.

This was important, because marriage and family gave protection and provision for women. Women in that era depended on male strength for protection and manpower to raise crops and provide basic necessities. So it was important to allow the woman an opportunity to remarry. We see this in the story of Ruth. After her husband and sons died, the widow Naomi urged her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to find new husbands who would provide for them (Ruth 1:8-9). Throughout the ancient world, women had few other options to turn to for protection and provision. To send a *wife away* without *a certificate of divorce* was cruel. It condemned her to a life of desperate instability. Therefore, Moses said in Deuteronomy 24:1-2,

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife."

But man's wickedness created loopholes in Moses's law. The loophole was manufactured from the phrase "found some indecency in her." By Jesus's day it seems men had come to justify themselves for divorcing their wives without reasonable cause. They could divorce their wives,

and assure themselves that they had done nothing wrong because they kept the law of Moses by giving their former wives *a certificate of divorce*.

But Jesus said this is not righteousness.

Stating His own divine authority, *I say to you*, Jesus gives His disciples a higher standard for grounds for *divorce*. This standard is *unchastity*. The word Matthew uses is “porneia” (G4202) from which we get our word pornography. It can also be translated “fornication” which means sexual immorality. *Everyone who divorces (apolyo) his wife except for this reason* is unrighteous because he *makes her commit adultery*.

A likely way *everyone who divorces (apolyo) his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery* is that sending her away for a *reason* other than *unchastity* creates an illegitimate divorce. It does not meet the standard of the intent of Moses’s law. Therefore when the woman marries another she is actually still married, and so commits *adultery*. But it is the divorcing husband who *makes her commit adultery*. Therefore the fault lies with the husband. He may have kept the letter of the law, as interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees, but he has violated the Law’s spirit.

In pointing this out, Jesus is unraveling a legal interpretation that might have been quite popular among the men listening to him. But Jesus is not striving to win popularity. He is presenting a kingdom platform, and inviting His disciples to participate in its bounty.

Jesus adds “*and whoever marries a divorced (apolyo) woman (without a legitimate certificate of divorce—Apostasion) commits adultery.*” In other words, if a woman has not been served her divorce papers for a proper reason, the reason of *unchastity*, she is still considered to be married. Therefore, it would be an act of *adultery* to have sex with or marry her. For the listening group of disciples, Jesus made it clear that He expected the men to treat their wives properly.

Biblical Text

It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.