

A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS

XLV. The Sermon On The Mount: False And True Righteousness

F. Christ's Righteousness Regarding The Issue Of Divorce

(Matthew 5:31-32 et al.)

I. Introduction

- A. Christ's great Sermon on the Mount provided valuable insight on God's true righteousness, what Israel's religious leaders greatly lacked as seen in their dead traditionalism.
- B. To illustrate the contrast between the false righteousness of Israel's leaders and God's true righteousness, Jesus gave six illustrations, with the third illustration regarding the issue of divorce in Matthew 5:31-32.
- C. We study this passage in view of other Scriptures for insight, application and edification (as follows):

II. Christ's Righteousness Regarding The Issue Of Divorce, Matthew 5:31-32 et al.

- A. Significantly, on the issue of divorce in Matthew 5:31, Jesus said, "It has been said . . .," **not**, "It was written" in Scripture, for Israel's religious leaders misinterpreted the Deuteronomy 24:1-4 command regarding divorce:
 - 1. Israel's religious leaders understood the protasis ("if" clause) of the conditional statement in Deuteronomy 24 to run in Deuteronomy 24:1 (KJV) from the word "When" down to the word "her" just before "then" in that verse. That interpretation taught that if a man had married a woman and he found something in her that was in some way undesirable, then he was **required** to divorce her so that she could become another man's wife, Deuteronomy 24:1-2. The passage would then be left teaching that divorce was required, but that if the woman's second husband divorced her, she could not remarry her first husband, Deut. 24:3-4.
 - 2. However, the correct interpretation is to take the protasis ("if" clause) as running from Deuteronomy 24:1 to the end of Deuteronomy 24:3, with the apodosis ("then" clause) existing in Deuteronomy 24:4. This interpretation would teach that if a man had married a woman, and for some reason he had found something in her that he didn't like so that he had divorced her and she remarried another man, were that second husband to divorce that woman, she could not remarry her first husband! (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to Deut. 24:1-4) Thus, this passage "cannot be construed as commanding divorce, only as regulating an existing practice," Ibid.
- B. Jesus in Matthew 19:7-8a accordingly explained that Moses had not commanded Israel's people to divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but that he had tolerated it due to the hardness of Israel's hearts since the people were already practicing divorce so rampantly! Indeed, God's ideal was that divorce never occur as seen in Christ's Matthew 19:8b and 4-6 comments on God's intended permanency of the marital union.
- C. Thus, Jesus added in Matthew 5:32a ESV (and the Greek text, cf. U. B. S. Grk. N. T., 1966, p. 14-15) that whoever divorced his wife except for "fornication" (*porneia*, Ibid., p. 15) caused his wife to commit adultery. This "exception clause" could only refer to uniquely Jewish circumstances that do not apply to us today:
 - 1. Since Jesus was under the Mosaic Law that required capital punishment for adultery (Deut. 22:22) and premarital intercourse with another man (Deut. 22:20-21), "fornication" could not mean immorality in general, for then the guilty woman would be executed, not divorced! (Bible Know. Com., O. T., p. 305)
 - 2. The Greek term *porneia* could refer to three circumstances applicable only to Hebrews under the Law in Jesus' day and not related to general immorality (Howard G. Hendricks, Christian Counseling For Contemporary Problems, 1968, p. 112-113) as follows:
 - a. As in the case that Joseph incorrectly thought he faced in Matthew 1:18-20, if immorality occurred during an engagement period, one had to get a divorce to break the engagement, what does not apply to us today.
 - b. If Hebrews wed within the prohibited Leviticus 18 degrees, it was called *porneia* (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1).
 - c. If Hebrews married unbelieving Gentiles, it was called *porneia* and had to be annulled, cf. Ezra 9-10.
- D. Thus, Jesus did not allow for divorce for anyone except for Hebrews under the Law in His day for the three circumstances provided immediately above, and so to commit divorce for any other cause was to cause the spouse to commit adultery, and whoever wed that divorced person also committed adultery, Matthew 5:32b.
- E. In summation, Jesus revealed that divorce was simply not permissible in the plan of God, for He had created marriage to be a permanent union, so divorce violated God's righteousness!

Lesson: *The extent to which God emphasized the permanence of the human marital union in Genesis 2:20-24 and in the words of Jesus Christ indicates that divorce was to be avoided to align with the righteousness of God.*

Application: *To function in alignment with God's righteousness, may we rely on the Holy Spirit to stay married!*