

# Jesus' Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (Matthew 19)

## Two Controversial Church Teachings: Marriage and Celibacy

### 1. What does the *Catechism* Teach about Marriage?

"From a valid marriage arises a *bond* between the spouses which by its very nature is *perpetual* and *exclusive*... [T]he marriage bond has been established by God himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved. This bond, which results from the free human act of the spouses and their consummation of the marriage, is a reality, henceforth *irrevocable*, and gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God's fidelity. The Church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. What does the *Catechism* teach about Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom?

*From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, to be intent on the things of the Lord, to seek to please him, and to go out to meet the Bridegroom who is coming. Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model.<sup>2</sup>*

### 3. What is the origin of these controversial teachings? Jesus Himself (Matthew 19)

#### Jesus' Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (Matt 19:1-12)

1 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; 2 and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 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'? (Gen 1:27; 2:24) 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" (Deut 24:1-4) 8 He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery."

10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." (Matthew 19:1-12)

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1638, 1640.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1618 (note: Virginity treated in section on Holy Matrimony).

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## Divorce and Remarriage in the Law of Moses

When a man takes a wife and marries her, *if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency* (Hebrew, *'erwath dabar*, "nakedness," or "shame of a thing") *in her*, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 and the latter husband dislikes her and writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt upon the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

## The Dead Sea Scrolls: Divorce and Remarriage Prohibited

"Assuredly they will preach"—are caught twice in fornication: *by taking two wives in their lives, even though the principle of creation is "Male and female he created them"* (Gen 1:27) and the ones who went into the ark "went in two by two into the ark" (Gen 7:9). And about the prince it is written: "He should not multiply wives to himself" (Deut 17:17).<sup>3</sup>

And he [the king] shall take no other wife in addition to her for she alone will be with him all the days of her life. And if she dies, he take for himself another from his father's house, from his family.<sup>4</sup>

## The Early Rabbis: Divorce and Remarriage Permitted

The School of Shammai say: 'A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, "Because he has found in her *indecency* in anything" (Deut 24:1). And the School of Hillel say: '[He may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written, "Because he has found in her indecency in *anything*" (Deut 24:1) Rabbi Akiba says: 'Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written: "And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes" (Deut 24:1).<sup>5</sup>

## Jesus: Marriage is an Unbreakable Covenant

4 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "*Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?*" [Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 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' (Gen 1:27; 2:24) 6 *So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.*" (Matthew 19:4-6)

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<sup>3</sup> *Damascus Document* [CDa] 4:20-5:2; cf. Vered Noam, "Divorce in Qumran in Light of Early Halakhah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 56 (2005): 206-223.

<sup>4</sup> *11QTemple* [11Q19] 57:17-19.

<sup>5</sup> Mishnah, *Gittin* ['Bills of Divorce'] 9:10. Translation Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 321.

# Jesus' Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (Matthew 19)

## What Does Jesus Mean by "Except for *Porneia*"?

[Jesus] said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: *whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (Greek, porneia), and marries another, commits adultery.*" (Matt 19:8-9)

## The Debate: Did Jesus Allow Divorce *and* Remarriage?

"According to Erasmus and most Protestant scholars since his time [15<sup>th</sup> century], Matthew allows the innocent party to divorce *and* *remarry* in the event of adultery. According to the almost universal patristic as well as Roman Catholic opinion, Matthew permits only separation for adultery, not remarriage."<sup>6</sup>

## Jesus Allows Divorce in Invalid Marriages (Levitical Law Interpretation)

1. Jesus allowed for divorce in the cases of *invalid* marriages b/c of *near blood relations*:

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father or the daughter of your mother, whether born at home or born abroad... You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, begotten by your father, since she is your sister. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's near kinswoman. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's near kinswoman. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; she is your brother's nakedness. (see Leviticus 18:6-18)

2. However, Jesus did *not* allow for *remarriage* after divorce.

3. In the case of a near-blood relation, there was no lawful marriage to begin with (compare a declaration of nullity [= 'an annulment']).

4. Compare the New American Bible translation:

"I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9; NAB)

5. Weakness: There is no patristic support for the translation 'incest'.

## Jesus Allows Divorce but Forbids Remarriage (Patristic Interpretation)

1. Jesus allowed for *divorce as separation* in cases of serious sexual sin (*porneia*)

2. However, Jesus did *not* allow for *remarriage* after divorce.

3. Spouses may separate (=divorce), but are not free to remarry.

But I say to you that *every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* (Matthew 5:31-32)

*To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) -- and that the husband should not divorce his wife.* (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

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<sup>6</sup> See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, 1991, 1998), 1:530.

## **Jesus' Teaching on Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy (Matthew 19)**

### **The Response of the Disciples: "It is Better Not to Marry!" (Matt 19:10-12)**

[Jesus said:] And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." The disciples said to him, "*If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.*" But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. *For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.* He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." (Matthew 19:9-12)

### **Isaiah's Prophecy: Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom**

1. Congenital Eunuchs: men who are unable to have children "from birth"
2. Man-made Eunuchs: men who are unable to have children b/c of other "men"
3. Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom:

Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil." Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "*Behold, I am a dry tree.*" For thus says the LORD: "*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.*" And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant - -these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:1-7)

### **The Catechism on Celibacy and Marriage**

*Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model.* [cites Matt 19:12!] Virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is an unfolding of baptismal grace, a powerful sign of the supremacy of the bond with Christ and of the ardent expectation of his return, a sign which also recalls that marriage is a reality of this present age which is passing away. *Both the sacrament of Matrimony and virginity for the Kingdom of God come from the Lord himself.* It is he who gives them meaning and grants them the grace which is indispensable for living them out in conformity with his will. *Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other:* "Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent. What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be truly good. The most excellent good is something even better than what is admitted to be good."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1619-1620.