

Sessions 14

Jesus' Teaching about Divorce: Mt 19.1-9

Context

One of the issues that surfaces amongst Matthew's Gospel audience concerns divorce: How are the divorced to be included into the Gospel household? What did Jesus teach? How can Jesus' teaching address a different situation?

In this teaching video for Sessions 14

In these videos, we see how:

- Matthew's Jesus teaches on divorce;
- Matthew reshapes this teaching for a new and different situation;
- Biblical Scholars have wrestled with this teaching—and how it is adapted in different Second Testament settings.



Children playing ball games, detail. Marble, Roman artwork of the second quarter of the 2nd century CE. Provenance unknown. Probably fragment of a Roman sarcophagus. (Attribution: Louvre Museum, creativecommons.org/ via Wikimedia Commons)

About Divorce

Matthew's teaching on divorce (19.1-12) deserves particular attention.

Bruce Vawter noted in 1977,

"The logion of Jesus, whatever its historical context, was construed by the earliest Christianity to be gospel and not law...At the very least, we should be able to say that on the NT precedent other situations can be envisaged in a twentieth-century Western world that are every bit as demanding of accommodation as those that occurred so long ago in the Matthean, Lucan, the Marcan, and the Pauline churches. What these situations might be, it is not our present task to specify."

B. Vawter, "Divorce," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1977: 529-40.

Joseph Fitzmyer also comments,

"If Matthew under inspiration could have been moved to add an exceptive phrase to the saying of Jesus about divorce that he found in an absolute form in either his Marcan source or in 'Q', or if Paul likewise under inspiration could introduce into his writing an exception on his own authority then why cannot the Spirit-guided institutional Church of a later generation make a similar exception in view of problems confronting Christian married life of its day or so called broken marriages (not really envisaged in the New Testament) as it has done in some situations?"

J. Fitzmyer, 'Matthean Divorce Texts and some new Palestinian Evidence,' *Theological Studies* (37) 1976: 224-5.

Pope Francis' words are also pastorally helpful on this matter:

"The Synod Fathers noted that "special discernment is indispensable for the pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned. Respect needs to be shown especially for the sufferings of those who have unjustly endured separation, divorce or abandonment, or those who have been forced by maltreatment from a husband or a wife to interrupt their life together...."

Amoris Laetitia #242.

"It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. "They are not excommunicated" and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community.²⁶¹ These situations "require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment. Language or conduct that might lead them to feel discriminated against should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community.

Amoris Laetitia #243.

Summary

Several features emerge in Mt 19.1-9:

- Jesus teaches about divorce with a particular Jewish interpretation.

- Subsequent generations (as found in Mark and Paul's letters) adapted this teaching to the circumstances that faced them.
- Matthew's "exceptive" clause shows, again, adaptation for pastoral reasons occurring.
- Such adaptation warns us against literalizing Jesus' teaching and not allowing pastoral care to shape Church practice.

For Reflection

- What are the difficult or challenging teachings and insights about divorce that emerge from Matthew's Gospel?
- In the light of this video reflection on divorce, what does it invite us as a Church to be towards those who experience ostracism?