

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, July 13

Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 19:3-12

JESUS TEACHING ON DIVORCE II

INTRODUCTION

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke in relating the life of Christ often give the events they record in practically the same words, though not necessarily in the same chronological order. We have such an instance in our Synaxis reading for this Sunday. Jesus' teaching on divorce is recorded in Mark and Matthew in a very similar way. We covered the Mark passage in the Sermon Notes for September 23, 2007. Please refer to those notes for this passage in Matthew.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 19:3-12

The Pharisees also came to him, tempting him, and saying to him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for every cause?"

And he answered and said to them, "Have you not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female,

And said, 'For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and the two shall become one flesh'?

Wherefore they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man separate."

They said to him, "Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to divorce her?"

He said to them, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts allowed you to divorce your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.

And I say to you, whosoever shall divorce his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry commits adultery: and whoso marries her who is divorced, commits adultery."
His disciples said to him, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry."

But he said to them, "All men cannot receive this saying, except those to whom it is given.

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs by men: and there are eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

NOTES

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And I say to you, whosoever shall divorce his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, commits adultery: and whoso marries her which is divorced commits adultery."

The verses above are almost exactly the same as those in Mark 10:1-12, the Synaxis reading for Sunday, September 23, 2007. The Sermon Notes for that day entitled, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce" discuss the reading. Please consult those notes for the above verses as well. In the notes that follow, discussion will center on the verses that are not found in the Mark passage.

His disciples said to Him, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry."

Jesus' teaching that divorcing a spouse is equivalent to adultery (a capital offense) except in the case of infidelity (before the marriage but discovered afterwards) was hard for them. What if a wife turned out to be one that was difficult to live with? There was no way to get out of the marriage. Under those conditions, it would be better to stay single. Or so it seemed to the disciples.

But He said to them, “All men cannot receive this saying, except those to whom it is given.

Which saying? Is it Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce or is it the disciples’ saying that it is better not to marry? The saying that follows is introduced by the preposition ‘for’ so it cannot be the statement concerning eunuchs. The ‘for’ indicates that it is the eunuchs who cannot receive the saying. They cannot function as a spouse. The saying then refers to Jesus’ statement regarding marriage—His quotation of the Genesis passage: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.”

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men, and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”

A eunuch is a castrated male and thus rendered incapable of sexual activity. In ancient times men were made eunuchs for service in a ruler’s harem or to serve as a palace guard. The word comes from ‘bed’ plus ‘keep’ and the duty was that of a chamberlain.

Sometimes, though rare, a premature baby boy is born without testicles (undescended—still in the abdomen) and in the days of Jesus the baby would in effect be in the same condition as a castrated male if the condition did not correct itself. For such a one, procreation is impossible and even the desire is faint or even absent. Marriage is not for these.

The third group of men, which Jesus referred to, was of men who were eunuchs of a different sort. It is said that one church father, Origen, took the term literally and castrated himself. However, most see this rightly as a reference to men who determine to master their sexuality and exercise self-control over it for the sake of God’s work which the cares of a family might delay or make too difficult. In their case, they are able to forego marriage for as long as is required. Not so other men, those who do not fall under the title ‘eunuch’, they should marry in a faithful union of one man and one woman, and if possible procreate children.