

SERMON NOTES

Third Sunday of Transfiguration

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 study for "Second Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Eve of the Fast of the Holy Cross of Varak)", and it would be redundant to repeat those notes here. However, Matthew has added an additional teaching which is not recorded by Mark and Luke. The additional teaching makes an exception to the expectation that adult members of the community should marry and rear children. It is this teaching that we will examine here.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 19:3-12

*And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying to him,
"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?"*

*And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created
them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,*

*And said, 'FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS
FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS
WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'?*

*Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore
God has joined together, let no man separate."*

*They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A
CERTIFICATE AND DIVORCE HER?"*

*He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses
permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has
not been this way.*

*"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality,
and marries another woman commits adultery."*

The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."

But he said to them, "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given."

"For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He that is able to accept this, let him accept it."

NOTES

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"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The verses above are almost exactly the same as those in Mark 10:1-12, the Synaxis reading for the Second Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The study for that day entitled, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce" discusses 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.

The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not 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), seemed hard to the disciples. 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, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given.

Which statement? 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. *For* indicates that it is the eunuchs who cannot receive the saying. A eunuch 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 eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept 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.

Members of the third group of men, to which Jesus referred, were eunuchs of a different sort. It is said that one church father, Origen, took “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” literally and castrated himself. However, most see Jesus’ statement 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.

APPLICATION

This passage of sacred Scripture has been misunderstood in the past with horrific consequences. After the death of the Apostles, and even before, strange teachings began to circulate among the early Christians. While they were still alive on earth, the Apostles dealt with the incorrect teachings, but afterwards, many false teachers arose who secretly introduced destructive heresies, and exploited the people for their own ends.¹ Such false teachers taught that celibacy was a more holy state than matrimony.² To achieve dominance over sexual desires they taught that devout men should castrate themselves. Many followed this teaching, apparently (according to the Church historian, Eusebius), even the famous Church Father, Origen.³

¹ 2 Peter: 2:1

² 1 Timothy 4:1-3

³ Justo L. Gonzales *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) p.137. See also *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaft and Henry Wall, series 2, Vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2004) p. 254, and especially footnote 1 of Chapter 8 on p. 254 for a discussion of the custom, but also of the argument that Origen did not castrate himself.

Jesus often used terms of the physical world for spiritual purposes. When he said if your eye offends you pluck it out, or if your hand offends you cut it off, everyone understood that He did not mean that to be taken in a literal, mechanical sense, but as hyperbole to make a point of the seriousness of sin. So here in our reading, the men who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom are not castrating themselves, but are behaving like castrated men; their sexual desire has been so completely suppressed that they may as well be eunuchs. These men have deliberately mastered their passions for the sake of the kingdom of heaven—that they might serve (without the sin of lust or illegitimate sexual activity), where a married man might be hindered by his responsibilities to wife and family. Such a man was St. Paul. But his choice was not more holy than St. Peter’s or the other Apostles’ who chose to marry. It was simply expedient for him.⁴ God gave him the grace to do it.

Jesus recognized in our passage that all people are not born equally. Some baby boys are born with a condition that would render them eunuchs. We are blessed today with the medical knowledge to correct that problem in an infant. However, we know that because of the sinful state of our world, nature is blighted, and little babies may be born handicapped in some way. This makes us very sad when we see such things. But we do not say that this was God’s will. His will was for us to live perfectly in a paradise with Him. We spoiled it by our sin, not He.

However, God and His grace are stronger than the power and effects of sin in our world. He has promised us that He will work “all things together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”⁵ This applies no matter in what condition we were born, or what life may bring upon us. Joni Eriksson Tada, through an accident, became a quadriplegic. But she truly loves God, and has discovered that God opened a marvelous ministry for her to share His love to other severely handicapped people. God took this tragic circumstance, and turned it to good for her, and for the kingdom of heaven.

Joni did not choose to be a quadriplegic—it was tragic that she was—but she did choose to let God overcome her handicap for His service. St. Paul did not choose to be a man of normal passions—it was good and right that he was—but he did choose to sacrifice that part of himself for the purpose to which God called him. Marriage, cleaving to a wife, was inexpedient for him, and so, with God’s grace, he suppressed his natural passion that might cause him to sin—becoming in that sense a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Neither the condition in which we are born in this sin blighted world, nor the condition in which the experiences of life may render us, alter the deep love of God for us. He became a man and died for each and every one of us. He paid the penalty for all of our sins upon the cross. He calls us all out of a life of sin into a wonderful fellowship with Him, and gives us the glorious opportunity to serve in the furthering of His kingdom. Sometimes, it may mean showing the transforming power of God to others in similar circumstances we have suffered, or sometimes it may be as a witness to the tremendous grace of God in the stresses of maintaining a faithful, loving and forgiving relationship between a husband and wife and the extended family.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:5

⁵ Romans 8:28

Sometimes, when marriage, as God defines it in Genesis 2, is not possible or expedient, it will mean foregoing and sacrificing our passions for the love of God and the kingdom of heaven.

God's will for us is to believe in Him, to trust Him and to know that He loves us no matter how we were born or what we have suffered. His will is for us to choose Him, to follow Him in righteousness, and to love Him no matter the personal cost. He gave everything for us, should we do less?

Our Lord's point in our passage was that while marriage is the normal calling of God for men (and women), because it is not good for man to be alone, there are cases of exception. The exceptions do not include the fear that a wife may not be perfectly suited to her husband. Support of marriage is clearly the point of the passage. However, perhaps we might extend the principle of the third class of eunuchs to apply to all of us who wish to serve God in our present state, single or married. The principle is that our legitimate rights can be sacrificed for the love of God and His kingdom. Even conjugal rights can be abstained from, for a short period of time, with consent of the spouse, to devote oneself to prayer and fasting.⁶

Therefore, when we sacrifice to the control of God one of our legitimate *rights* (sexual, or status, or property, or any of our other rights, including life itself) in order to show God's love to others, we can trust Him. God will work everything together for the good that results in our transformation, and the building of His beloved kingdom in Christ.

May God give us the grace required to live righteously and lovingly for Him.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 7:5. It is emphasized that the husband and wife resume relations after the agreed upon time, so that Satan might not tempt them to sin.