



The context.

In chapters 5 to 7 of the Gospel according to Matthew, which are called The Sermon on the Mount, he gives a summary of the teaching of Jesus, who came to bring the law to its full fulfilment.¹

In chapter 5 Jesus says repeatedly: “**You have heard** that it was said ...”, and He then refers to a passage from the law, which He supplements with the words: “**But I tell you ...**”.

In this way Jesus makes the **spirit of the law** clear, as in the example of the man who is already committing adultery in his heart by looking at a woman lustfully (verse 28).

The text:

In this context Jesus says:

- *It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ (Matthew 5:31)*
- ***But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32)***

A few parallel texts:

Answering the question of the Pharisees concerning divorce and why Moses commanded that a letter of divorce be given to the women, He says:

- *Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because **your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.** (Matthew 19:8)*

And He then repeats what He also says in chapter 5:32:

- *I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.**” (Matthew 19:9)*

Mark and Luke also mention Jesus’ declaration concerning divorce:

- *He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:11-12)*
- *“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)*

What does Jesus teach about adultery?

What is committing adultery?

Committing adultery is the translation of the Greek verb ‘**moichao**’.

‘**Moichao**’ is translated by the OLB as:

→ to have unlawful intercourse with another’s wife, to commit adultery with

¹ Study: Matthew 5.17 - Jesus has fulfilled the law.



According to the legislation from the Old Testament both man and woman are guilty in this situation.

- *If a man commits adultery with another man's wife - with the wife of his neighbour - **both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.** (Leviticus 20:10)*

The message in Jesus' declarations in Matthew, Mark and Luke:

1. The responsibility of the man.

- *... anyone who divorces his wife, ... makes (is the cause thereof) her the victim of adultery, ... (Matthew 5:32)*

2. For anyone who marries a divorced woman:

- *... anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:32)*
- *... the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Luc 16:18)*

3. When does someone commit adultery?

- *... anyone who divorces his wife, ... and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:9)*
- *Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. (Marc 10:11-12)*
- *Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, ... (Luc 16:18)*

4. When does the wife commit adultery?

- *And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." (Marc 10:11-12)*

From this it becomes apparent that a marriage is not broken in God's eyes after an official divorce.

Paul later draws his teaching on marriage from these declarations of Jesus:

- *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:10)*
- *But if she does, she must **remain unmarried** or else **be reconciled to her husband.** And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1 Corinthians 7:11)*

And:

- *So then, if she (the married woman) has sexual relations with another man **while her husband is still alive**, she is called an **adulteress**. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man. (Romans 7:3)*

What applies to a woman in all these texts also applies to a man of course.

What does Jesus add in Matthew 5:32 and also in 19:9?

Matthew confirms Jesus' declarations in the Gospels of Mark and Luke:

- that a marriage continues to exist in God's eyes, even after a divorce



- that remarriage after divorce is tantamount to living in a state of adultery with respect to the previous marriage partner.

However, in Matthew Jesus adds an exception.

If a man divorces his wife because of **'sexual immorality'** (verse 5:32 and 19:9 – Greek: 'porneia'), he is not responsible for adultery.

By living in adultery his wife has herself chosen to be adulterous and this remains so if the husband divorces her in this situation.

What is 'porneia'?

'Porneia' is translated as **'sexual immorality'** in 23 Bible texts, including Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

According to the OLB **'porneia'** means: unlawful sexual intercourse.

- It is derived from **'porneuo'**: to prostitute one's body to the lust of another.
- This word is itself derived from **'porne'**: a woman who sells her body for sexual uses (idem for the man: **'pornos'**).
- This word is related to **'piprasko'**: to sell, to sell into slavery

'Porneia' is only translated as **'sexual immorality'** in our language.

Remark:

- **Sexual immorality:** is an almost constant state of adultery.
- **Adultery:** is not necessarily identical to sexual immorality.

Incidental adultery is not sexual immorality, even when it takes place repeatedly.

What Jesus said to the adulteress is applicable in that case:

- *"Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:11)*

Why does Jesus make an exception for sexual immorality?

Jesus says that if a husband divorces his wife, he is responsible for adultery being committed with her, if she gives herself to another man.

However, if his wife lives as a prostitute and regularly sells her body to other men, she lives in a permanent state of adultery.

In this situation, if the husband divorces his sexually immoral wife, this does not at all alter the situation she has chosen. In that case the husband is not responsible for the adultery committed by his wife if he divorces her, since his wife is the cause of the adultery herself.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:32 that only in this situation is the husband not responsible for the fact that adultery is committed with his (ex)wife.

It can be concluded from verse 19:9 that, if his wife is active as a prostitute, the husband is not guilty of adultery if he marries another woman.



Remark:

Jesus confirms that a marriage is a lifelong undertaking and that it is not man's prerogative to dissolve it.

He indicates that the marriage union is not broken by the pronouncement of a divorce.

On the contrary, as far as God is concerned, the marriage union continues to exist even after divorce.

Only according to Matthew 19:9 the husband himself is not guilty of adultery if he dissolves the marriage union with his prostitutely wife, in order to marry another woman.

It is nevertheless questionable whether the husband would not do better to remain unmarried.

Consider how God repeatedly restored the relationship with the Israelites, when they repented of their spiritual adultery, the worship of other gods.

In the same way, God strongly desires a husband and a wife to be ultimately reconciled to each other.