

V

ON DIVORCE

The Pharisees also came unto him tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?---*Matthew 19: 3.*

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ON the text from the Gospel according to Matthew, whether it is lawful for a man to put away his wife for every reason? ¹ A beautiful lesson is presented to the Christians and the industrious in the conjunction of these two days; I mean the Sabbath and the Lord's Day, which revolving time brings round each week. These days, as mothers or nurses of the church, both assemble the people and seat the priests before them as teachers. And they lead both learners and teachers to care for their souls. So the discourse of yesterday is still ringing in my ears, and the things ¹³⁴ that concerned us then linger in my memory. I behold the cross set up, according to the prophecy of Isaiah, and the Lord's garments stained with blood, like the garments of one who treads the wine-press; ² and I see the Saviour bearing in his right hand the reward; and Solomon I behold exactly arranging for us the balances and weights to the best of his ability. ³ And I pity the debtor of the Gospel, who did not share with his fellow servant the clemency which he had received from his Lord, but by thoughtlessness and harshness brought calamity again upon himself. ⁴ For with those chapters we were yesterday busy as all of you who were not inattentive know.

And to-day again the Spirit lays before us many things, all beautiful, as many as are on the table which you see. And I ¹³⁵ have fixed my attention on the disputatious and tempting Pharisees; and I have pitied them exceedingly for the depravity of their dispositions, inasmuch as they sought to outwit even the Fountain of wisdom by their questions and failed in their attempt; the divinity of the Only-begotten ever turning their questions against themselves. It was of them, as it seems to me, that Isaiah prophesied, when he said, "I am the Lord that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish; that confirmeth the word of his servant." ⁵ And again David says, "They flatter with their tongue; Hold them guilty, O God; let them fall by their own counsels." ⁶ But thanks be to them, hostile though they were, that they moved Wisdom to answer, in order that he might leave behind in writing for us, his servants, instruction for ¹³⁶ our profit. For, behold, marriage, the chief affair of human life, is regulated by him, and the limits of this union and the conditions of its dissolution are exactly determined. Let each one earnestly attend to the two ordinances of marriage, in order that women may be instructed as to their duties and men in the duties which belong to them.

"Whether it is lawful for a man to put away his wife for every reason?" This, then, is the problem of the Jews. I see the aim of their asking this question in the presence of the others. For since women are more ready to believe than men and are more susceptible to the magnificence of miracles, and inclined to the acceptance and belief of the divinity of Christ, (thus even behind the murderers who were dragging the Lord to the cross, was the multitude of women who bewailed his ¹³⁷ sufferings, and, following the Saviour, piteously lamented him) ⁷ in order that they might lead him to offend and alienate all women, the Jews, by their crafty question, laid a trap and snare for him. But the Lord, through the power of his divinity, seeing what villainy they were devising, defeating their treachery, and, at the same time, laying down beneficent rules of life, makes reply, pleading the cause of women, and sending away empty those hungry wolves of Pharisees who in vain had snapped at him with their questions. "The creation itself," says he, "shows its aim to be union, not separation." The Creator was the first bestower of the bride in marriage, since he joined the first human beings in the marriage bond, giving to those who should come after, the inflexible ordinance of the conjugal life, which must be recognized as ¹³⁸ the law of God; and they who are thus associated with one another are no longer two, but one flesh, so that "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

These things were spoken to the Pharisees; but do you hear them now, you who do such things as these: you who change your wives as readily as your garments; who build bridal chambers as often and as easily as you build booths for feasts; who marry money, and deal in women; who if provoked a little immediately write a bill of divorcement; you who leave many widows while you are yet alive; believe me, marriage is terminated only by death or adultery. For it is not as in the case of mistresses, a companionship for a few days only, nor a mere quest for pleasure, but like most other things is subject to rule and regulation. But in marriage, O man, both soul and body are united, so that ¹¹³⁹ disposition is mingled with disposition, and flesh with flesh. How, then, are you going to sever the bond of marriage without suffering? How can you withdraw from this union easily and without pain, after taking your sister and wife not as a servant of a few days, but as a partner for life, a sister by reason of her formation and creation,---for you were both made of the same element of earth and of the same substance,---and wife because of the conjugal union, because of the law of marriage? What sort of a bond, then, are you about to break, for you are bound by both law and nature; and how will you set at naught the agreements which you made at marriage? What sort of compacts do you think I mean? Those made when the dowry had been agreed upon, when with your own hand you signed the roll, and set your seal to the contract? These are strong indeed, ¹¹⁴⁰ and possess stability enough, but I refer back to the utterance of Adam: "This is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones, This shall be called my wife." ⁸ Not without reason is this utterance preserved in writing; for, uttered by the first man, it is the common covenant of men, made with the whole class of women, who are joined by law to their husbands. Do not be surprised if by what one has said, another is bound. For whatever happened in the beginning, in the case of those first created, has become the nature of their posterity.

If, then, the woman you have lightly divorced shall take the book of Genesis and drag you unto the Judge, who is both Judge and witness, tell me, what will you say? How will you repudiate your own utterance which you made in the name of ¹¹⁴¹ God, which Moses, the servant of God, recorded, instead of some cheap notary? God gave Adam a wife without father and without mother; and for this reason, as a guardian he shielded the orphan. But now daughters strongly assert their mothers' rights against their unfeeling and undutiful husbands. So that from every point of view it is impossible for you to slight your wife with impunity, bound as you are by the ancient laws of God and the modern laws of men.

Let your wife's very helpfulness put you to shame. For she is a companion, a helper, a partner with whom to pass your life, and to bring children into the world, an aid in sickness, a comfort in distress, the guardian of the hearth, the custodian of the household goods, having the same sorrows, the same joys, sharing with you your wealth, if wealth be yours, or mitigating ¹¹⁴² hard poverty, resourcefully and sturdily bearing up against its grievous consequences, and because of her marriage with you, enduring the toilsome rearing of children. And if perchance a change of fortune overtakes the husband, he overwhelmed thereby sinks into obscurity, and those who have been considered friends, measuring their friendship by the duration of his prosperity, desert him in his adversity, while the servants run away from both master and misfortunes. Only the wife is left, a partner of his distress, serving her husband amid manifold evils. She wipes away his tears, and heals his stripes if he be smitten. She follows him when he is led to prison; and if permitted to enter with him, she cheerfully shares his confinement. But if even this be forbidden she remains at the door of the prison, like a dog devoted to his master. ¹¹⁴³

I have known a woman who even cut off her hair, and put on man's attire,---and that gay-colored, in order that when her husband fled and hid himself, she might not be separated from him. And while she seemed to be a slave, in truth she was a slave of love. This life she lived for many years, going from place to place, and from wilderness to wilderness. Such a one, too, we find the wife of most excellent Job to be. For all had left him. With the loss of his wealth his flatterers departed from him. His friends, too, limited their friendship by the duration of his prosperity. If they were present at all, they came to reproach, not to cheer him. Instead of comforting him they aggravated his calamity. By reason of it, indeed, all his "miserable comforters" ⁹ uttered indignant complaints against him. But she alone, who ¹¹⁴⁴ had before lived in splendor, sat with her husband upon the dunghill, scraping off the discharge, and drawing the worms from his sores. Thus was she the partner of his life, not the sharer of his prosperity only; an inseparable friend, not a mere flatterer during his days of pleasure,---the only blessing that remained of all his good fortune and of all his intimates and kindred. So on account of her lofty and superlative affection for her husband, she fell even into the sin of blasphemy, counseling him to utter a blasphemous word against God so that he might die quickly and not be long punished, and that she might not see him in his ceaseless pains. ¹⁰ For she took no account of her own misfortune of widowhood that would follow, but she cared for only one thing,---that her husband might escape from his insupportable existence. These ¹¹⁴⁵ are the lessons which those who outrage the ordinances of marriage should learn from antiquity and from modern experience.

Now what can the man seeking divorce say to this? And what sort of specious defense of his own fickleness can he offer? "My wife's disposition," he says, "is mean and hateful, and her tongue is violent, and her tastes are not domestic, and her house is ill-managed." So be it. Granted. I am so far persuaded, and accept it, like the judges who are not very critical in hearing, but are readily carried away by the invectives of advocates. But tell me, when you first married her, did you not know that you were being joined to a human being? And does anybody fail to see that to a human being sin attaches? For perfection is of God alone. And do you yourself, then, never sin? Do you not cause your ¹¹⁴⁶ wife pain by your conduct? Are you free from all fault? Do you preserve the ordinance of wedlock in purity? Oh, how many times, perhaps, your wife has endured your drunken violence! How many ready insults and shameful reproaches she has patiently suffered! And how many shortcomings of yours are kept secret, because your wife has not published them! She has borne with you when you were angry without reason, and boiling with wrath; and the free woman, your equal in station, has remained silent like a slave from the market. When you failed through poverty or parsimony to furnish the necessaries of life, though grieved, she did not reproach you. Nay, further, when you came once from a banquet, drunken and frenzied, she did not cast you off, hating you for your drunkenness, but with kindly forgiveness she received you, and though you resisted, ¹¹⁴⁷ she led you by the hand, and gently bathed your head, dizzied by the fumes of the wine, and guided you to the marriage bed, alone feeling sympathy, while the domestics were laughing and mocking at their master's drunken derangement. Yet you stalk about the neighborhood heartlessly accusing and misrepresenting your wife, that you may awaken sympathy for yourself and secure approval of your prospective divorce. Hard is the heart of such men, savage and cruel, sprung, as the proverb says, from oak or rock. ¹¹ For wiping out the memory of all past kindnesses, they unfeelingly seek divorce. But who chops off a diseased limb, instead of healing it, and that, too, when no dangerous malady has attacked it, but when there is bright and certain ¹¹⁴⁸ prospect of restoration? A blister has risen on the hand; let us carefully attend to it. A boil has begun to annoy the foot; let us reduce the swelling with liniment. But if we decline the attendance of physicians and busy ourselves with amputation and the knife in the case of each of the disordered parts, before we have lived long we shall have pruned ourselves of all our limbs. But not so, sirs. Let there be some thought even of the limbs. Let the very services of your wives put you to shame. However much you are provoked, compare the pain of one child-birth with your grounds of complaint, and you will find your crowd of grievances outweighed.

Recall her good deeds of kindness: nursing of the sick, companionship in misfortune, tearful entreaties in court on her husband's behalf; leaving her parents and the ancestral hearth, and following a ¹¹⁴⁹ stranger; selling her own property to atone for her husband's insolence and relieve his embarrassment. Let all this unite you to her and prove a bond of affection, propping up and making secure your unsteady soul, as one braces a dilapidated house. Let pity prevail, and let not intimacy and the association of a long life, which makes even brute beasts inseparable, be trodden under foot. For I have seen an ox lowing piteously when he had wandered away from his fellows and found himself alone; and a sheep bleating in a glen and scurrying over the mountains until it rejoined the flock from which, while feeding, it was parted. And a she-goat in this same plight, no matter if as she runs she overtakes many flocks of goats, does not stop until she finds her own flock and her own herdsman.

Let us who are reasonable beings not be ¹¹⁵⁰ found less susceptible to friendship than the brutes. And let us not hold a wife less precious than a fellow traveler, or a man, who on some slight pretext has suddenly become dear to us. You observe how men meeting one another even on the highways, and coming under the roof of the same inn, or under some spreading tree, as a shelter in summer from the noonday heat, make the chance meeting the occasion of genuine friendship; and when they come to the place where their ways diverge, they do not part from one another without emotion, but stand and with tears in their eyes look earnestly upon one another, while each gives mementoes to the other to carry with him. And after going a little way, they turn back again, and call to each other, invoking good fortune upon each other. Does a little time like this cement a friendship so closely that separation ¹¹⁵¹ becomes difficult and is only effected by absolute necessity, and will you think as lightly of the partner of your life, as of a broken dish, or a cheap cloak spoiled on a journey, or a Maltese lap-dog that has escaped the house? Where is that attachment that was formed at first? Where the sharing of one bed, the bond of law, the power of constant and protracted association, which, as the saying is, and experience proves,---becomes a second nature? You have snapped them all asunder more easily than Samson the cords of the Philistines. ¹²

But the man who is wise and guards his attachment does not easily forget his wife even after she has departed this life; but he cherishes the children that she leaves as a trust common to him and her and sees in them the departed one. For one of the children preserves the tones of his mother's ¹¹⁵² voice; another possesses most of her features; another is like her in disposition. Thus the father has impressed upon him, with many living and striking likenesses of his wife before him, the immortal character of his union with her. For this reason, he takes no thought of pleasure. He does not to-day heap up a grave and shortly thereafter furnish a nuptial chamber. He does not hasten from tears

and groans to the marriage dance. He does not exchange his black and mourning garb for a wedding suit. He does not lead a second wife to the marriage bed, still warm, of her who is departed, nor does he give a stepmother, hateful name, to his children. But he imitates the strange yet natural devotion of the turtle-dove. For they say that that bird, when separated from its mate, devotes itself to perpetual widowhood, and is very different from the common dove, as far as mating ¹¹⁵³ again is concerned. So, then, let reproaches come thick and fast upon the husband who seeks divorce, and let the charges of ingratitude, falling thicker than snowflakes, pelt him.

But if he put forward a charge of adultery, and offer this as the ground of his separation, I will at once become the advocate of the injured man, and directing my discourse against the adulteress, will take my stand beside the husband, no longer his foe, but his valiant ally, commending him who flees the treacherous woman, and severs the tie which bound him to an asp and a viper. For the Creator of all is the first to absolve this man as justly indignant, and right in driving the plague from his house and hearth. For marriage exists for these two things, love and offspring, neither of which is compatible with adultery. For there is no love when ¹¹⁵⁴ affection turns towards another; and honor in bringing children into the world is destroyed, when their parentage is made doubtful. The things that contribute to this sin have been duly mentioned under another head. But pray let both parties to the marriage contract practise self-control,---the unbroken bond of wedlock. For where the honor of marriage is maintained, there is, of necessity, affection and peace, with no vulgar and unlawful desire to excite the soul, and expel legitimate and righteous love.

This law of self-control is not ordained by God for women alone, but for men also. But they who give heed to secular lawgivers, and leave to men the unrestricted license of adultery, while they are stern judges and teachers of the sanctity of women, are themselves shamelessly licentious. Healers of others, according to the proverb, they are yet themselves full of ¹¹⁵⁵ sores. ¹³ If any one upbraids them with these offenses, they offer a subtle and playful defense. For men, they say, even if they approach many women, do their own hearth no harm; but women, if they sin, introduce alien heirs into their houses and families. But let the sophisticated inventors of this frivolous justification of their conduct know that they themselves are overturning other hearths and homes. For the women with whom they associate are surely the daughters or wives of somebody; and in any case there will be found either a marriage plotted against, or a parent wronged who has begotten and reared a daughter, hoping to have a virgin for the bridal chamber, but whose fond expectation has been thwarted by the robbers of her virtue. If the wretch is a father, let him think on the feelings of a father who ¹¹⁵⁶ has been thus disappointed; if a husband, let him imagine himself the injured man. For usually it is well that each one judge the affairs of another as he wishes another to judge his own. And if any, heeding the law of the Romans, consider fornication permissible, they make a dreadful mistake, not knowing that God lays down law in one way, while men make statutes in another. Listen to Moses, as he proclaims the will of God, and utters bitter condemnation against fornicators. ¹⁴ Listen to Paul when he says: "Fornicators and adulterers God will judge." ¹⁵ Other teachers will not be able to save you in the time of retribution, but, trembling and filled with consternation, they shall melt away. Plato, the professor of laws, shall appear to you then ignorant and untaught, and that weighty voice, which assumed authority over all ¹¹⁵⁷ lawgivers, will be humbled when he and they shall see the lovers of the body to whom they have wickedly permitted license, dragged forth to punishment. And assuredly they who have not forbidden others, have first involved themselves in the sin, and are found liable to a twofold charge, both for what they themselves have done, and because they have allowed others to be licentious. Let those, therefore, whose purpose it is to live with the very purest wives, make their own manner of life a model for their spouses, in order that they may maintain in the home a worthy rivalry in virtue.

[Footnotes renumbered and moved to the end]

1. ¹ Matthew 19: 3.

2. ¹ Isaiah 63: 1-3.

3. ² Proverbs 11: 1.

4. ³ Matthew 18: 28ff.

5. ¹ Isaiah 44: 25.

6. ² Psalm 5: 9, 10.

7. ¹ Luke 23: 27.

8. ¹ Genesis 2: 23. The quotation does not agree exactly either with Heb. or Lxx.

9. ¹ Job 16: 2.

10. ¹ Job 2: 9.

11. ¹ Odyssey 19: 163, "You are not born of immemorial oak or rock" (Palmer). Cf. Clement of Alexandria, who quotes the verse, *Admonit. ad Gentes*, p. 18.

12. ¹ Judges 16: 12.

13. ¹ Cf. Euripides, Frag. 1071.

14. ¹ Deuteronomy 22: 22.

15. ² Hebrews 13:4.