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The Teaching of Jesus on Divorce.

BY THE REV. G. ESTWICK FORD, B.A.

(Concluded from page 177.)

LET us now consider these points in detail :

1. We need not here discuss the conclusion as to the origin of the first Gospel at which critics have arrived. Even if we admit that the author had St. Mark's Gospel before him, it is difficult to see how St. Matthew's mention of the exception can render St. Mark's mention of the general rule less intelligible. As the Bishop does not explain how this result follows, we can only assume that he, too, finds here the kind of inconsistency which we have already considered and seen to be non-existent.

2. Nor does the expression of astonishment on the part of the disciples, which St. Matthew records, lead us of necessity to infer that the words of the exception were not spoken by our Lord. Dr. Gore declares that nothing short of the abolition of divorce would be sufficient to account for the dismay of the disciples ; but surely, if this were so, we may assume that the author of the Gospel would have had sufficient sense to perceive that, by inserting this item of information, he was making it impossible for his readers to accept as genuine the clause which, according to the critics, he had deliberately fabricated and put into the mouth of Jesus. St. Mark does not record the dismay of the disciples, even though he omits the exception : it is the author of St. Matthew alone who notices it ; and it would have been an incredibly stupid thing of him, under the circumstances assumed by the critics, to have invited attention in this wholly gratuitous fashion to the unwarrantable liberty which he had dared to take in so seriously misrepresenting the teaching of Jesus Christ on a topic of such vital importance. Is it not far more reasonable to suppose that the words of the exception, and also the astonishment of the disciples, have been recorded here because the writer was only concerned about giving a full and faithful account of what actually transpired ?

But is the astonishment of the disciples at all remarkable even if the exception is retained? Assuredly not, if we only bear in mind the amazing slightness of the marriage-bond and the extraordinary facilities for divorce which then prevailed in Palestine, and that with the full approval of the most eminent Rabbis. To commit a breach of the laws of tithing or of setting apart the first of the dough, to go in public with uncovered head, to be seen spinning in the street, to enter into talk with men, to be childless, to burn or over-salt the dinner, to be quarrelsome or troublesome, or even to speak disrespectfully of one's mother-in-law, was quite sufficient ground for the divorce of a wife; and even though she could be charged with none of the host of trivial things that served as excuses for divorce, her husband could nevertheless put her away all the same merely because he had happened to fancy a more attractive woman.¹ It must be obvious that to the average Jew, accustomed as he was to this practically unlimited licence, the rigid limitation of divorce to the case of marital unchastity would be hardly less novel and startling than its complete prohibition. We can well understand that the words of Jesus would astonish the disciples. Even to-day, as many of the witnesses before the Divorce Commission have shown, this limitation of facilities for divorce appears to many to be intolerably narrow.

3. We need not dwell upon the apparent discrepancy between St. Matt. v. 32 and St. Luke xvi. 18. In the first place it is impossible to prove that the two records refer to one and the same saying of our Lord, the probability being rather the other way. The words are very much to the point in St. Luke's context: they are the sharp personal rebuke of the Pharisees who derided Jesus, His disciples and His teaching, whilst outwardly professing to be the sole guardians and vindicators of the law of God, which law they were nevertheless habitually violating, and notoriously so in the matter of the sanctity of marriage. It is clear that in a reference under such circumstances to the law of divorce it would have been altogether out

¹ Edersheim, book iv., chapter xxii.

of place to have specified the exception to the general rule, seeing that these Pharisees were well aware of the exception to the indissolubility of marriage which Deut. xxiv. allowed, and that the very point of our Lord's accusation was that, through their rabbinical interpretations, they were violating, not an ideal marriage-law, but the law of Moses which they themselves acknowledged.

4. In order to illustrate the alleged tendency of the writer of the first Gospel to alter, for purposes of his own, the original record of our Lord's words and the events attending His ministry, and thus to exhibit the alleged unreliability of this Gospel where it differs from St. Mark or St. Luke, Dr. Gore refers us to St. Matt. xii. 40, xxi. 2, xxvi. 15, and xxvii. 34, in all of which cases he suggests that the writer has altered the original narrative in order to set up a correspondence between the words, or the event, recorded and some Old Testament story or prophecy. The Bishop, indeed, does no more than mention these passages, and we have to turn to Archdeacon Allen's "St. Matthew" for the argument in each case. With regard to the first of these passages, the point is to show that this Gospel puts into the mouth of Jesus the words which are recorded here, but are omitted in the corresponding section of St. Luke, in order to institute an exact correspondence between the words of Jesus and the experience of Jonah, as recorded in the book which bears his name. The Archdeacon concludes his note as follows: "Matthew has, of course, rather forced his analogy. Putting aside the fact that, according to Christian tradition, Christ lay in the grave only one whole day and parts of two others, he has tried to increase the parallelism by adding three nights, when at the most there were only two." But here again we may fairly ask, Was the writer of this Gospel so foolish as not to see for himself, and to realize that all his readers also would see, what Mr. Allen has here pointed out? If the Lord had said no more than St. Luke has recorded, is it reasonable to suppose that a Gospel writer would have added words which the facts of the case, as universally acknowledged, would at once

have branded as spurious? Is it a matter "of course" that the writer of the first Gospel must inevitably do some silly thing if the least chance of doing so presents itself? It is but natural to suppose that our Lord would not leave His hearers in the dark as to the sense in which the sign of Jonah should be a sign to His own generation; and, if so, why should He not have expressed Himself as this Gospel represents Him as doing, especially when we consider that in Jewish computation of time a day and a night together made up a *νυχθήμερον*, and that any part of such a period might be spoken of as a whole?¹ It is interesting in this connection to note that St. Matthew mentions our Lord as saying "on the third day" where St. Mark says "after three days."² In point of fact, St. Mark's "after three days" is as really out of literal accord with the facts of the case as St. Matthew's "three days and three nights," but is there anyone who on that account would deny the possibility of our Lord having used those words?

In the case of St. Matt. xxi. 2-8, the allegation is that the Evangelist has drawn upon his own imagination for the ass in order to make the incident an exact fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy; and here, once more, Archdeacon Allen finds occasion to show up the writer's lack of ordinary intelligence. "Matthew, in modifying the passage," says he, "is not quite careful to make the details harmonious. The Lord could not ride on both animals, and there was no need, therefore, to place clothes on both." And again: "If the editor had not just said that they placed clothing upon *them*, we might take *ἐπάνω αὐτῶν* here to refer to the *ἵμάτια*. But he may have meant it to refer to the animals, regardless of the impossibility of riding more than one at a time." It does not seem to occur to this critic that, as the disciples did not know which animal the Lord would use, they would quite naturally cast their garments upon both, so that He might at once mount whichever He chose. There was, however, no need whatever for the Evangelist to invent

¹ See Alford's note on St. Matt. xxi. 40.

² St. Matt. xvi. 21; St. Mark viii. 31.

the ass, if she had not been there, in order to find in this incident a fulfilment of prophecy. Indeed, the mention of the colt alone would have produced a still closer correspondence with the prophet's language :

“ Lowly, and riding upon an ass ;
Even upon a colt, the foal of an ass.”¹

Here it is evident that Zechariah was not thinking of two animals, but only of one—viz., the colt, which in the first line is described as to the nature of the animal—an ass ; and in the second as to its youth—a colt. Persons, however, who are acquainted with countries where the ass is generally used as a beast of burden, and where it is a very common thing to see the colt loosely fastened alongside its mother in order to begin the process of being broken in, will recognize in St. Matthew's account a touch of naturalness which speaks much for the minute accuracy of the narrative, and renders it most probable that the man who wrote this account was himself an eyewitness of the events which he records.

The reference to Judas (xxvi. 15, xxvii. 3-10) need not detain us long. The suggestion is that the Evangelist invented the thirty pieces of silver in order to produce a correspondence with Zech. xi. 12, 13. But why should he be considered inaccurate in specifying the amount received by Judas merely because St. Mark and St. Luke do not specify it? For what was there in the transaction to have suggested to the Evangelist the otherwise most unlikely reference to Zech. xi., if he had not been struck with the similarity in the amount actually paid, and the use to which the money was actually put? Nor is the story at all improbable, for the amount specified was the price of a slave, and one can well understand that the rulers who paid it would delight to inflict this petty insult upon Him whom they so hated.

The last passage to which Dr. Gore refers is xxvii. 34, in comparison with St. Mark xv. 23. Here it is suggested that St. Matthew introduces the word “gall” in order to effect a

¹ Zech. ix. 9 (R.V.).

correspondence with Ps. lxix. 21. It must, however, be observed that the more probable text of St. Matthew reads "*wine mingled with gall*,"¹ which very much lessens the supposed correspondence; and, further, that the Evangelist himself makes no reference to the Psalm, as he would certainly have done if he had wilfully altered the original text to make it correspond with the prophetic Psalm. Moreover, a careful examination of the case renders it extremely probable that the writer of this Gospel, in using the words he has employed, is simply stating the actual facts with strict accuracy. St. Mark uses a general expression, *ἔσμυρμισμένος*, corresponding to our word "drugged." It is evident that he does not mean that the draught was a mixture of wine and myrrh, for myrrh is not an opiate, and a draught of that sort would have been quite useless. But the word in the first Gospel is *χολή*, the word by which the LXX translates the Hebrew *שׁוֹן*, which means "hemlock," "poppy," poison in general.² A draught composed of wine mixed with a powerful opiate such as St. Matthew specifies would be the very thing needed for the purpose for which this last cup was mercifully given to persons about to be crucified.

5. Let us now see to what conclusion all these alleged inaccuracies are supposed to lead us. We are asked to believe that in some Jewish-Christian community, somewhere in Palestine, there arose a man who, with St. Mark's Gospel, a collection of sayings of Jesus by St. Matthew, and sundry other documents or traditions to work upon, compiled the Gospel according to St. Matthew; and that in deference to the old Jewish feeling prevalent in his community, or owing to "the exigencies of ethical necessity in the Christian Church," as Archdeacon Allen puts it, this anonymous compiler, who habitually altered the narrative of his original authorities to suit his own purposes, took it upon himself to alter the words of Jesus on this vitally important subject of marriage, and in such a manner that the law of Jesus as it left this writer's hands was

¹ *οἶνος* instead of *ὄξος*, vinegar.

² Cf. Deut. xxix. 18 (R.V. marg.), Deut. xxxii. 32, Hos. x. 4, etc.

a totally different thing from that law as it fell from the Master's lips. Further, that, in order to lend probability to his fabrication, he deliberately put into the mouth of our Lord's questioners a phrase that they never used, thus showing that his act was wilful and of set purpose. This of itself would be sufficiently amazing ; but we are further confronted with what, under the alleged circumstances, would be the astounding fact that this anonymous compilation, marred, as is alleged, by such a gross perversion of the teaching of the Son of God, and disfigured by so many wilful and palpable inaccuracies, was accepted without the least question by the whole of the primitive Church, was assigned the highest place in the list of the four Gospels, and was universally and unhesitatingly ascribed to no less a person than the Apostle, St. Matthew.¹ Is it at all conceivable, we may well ask, that a work of such an origin and of such a character could so rapidly and so completely have attained the position in the Christian Church which this Gospel occupied, and that, with regard to the passages with which we are now specially concerned, not even a single various reading in any manuscript should betray the faintest suspicion, on the part of the primitive Church, of the alleged misrepresentation of the words of Jesus? Surely we should demand the strongest and fullest evidence, both external and internal, to make us accept such a conclusion. And what is the evidence that the critics have to offer us? Of external evidence not a syllable. Of internal evidence, such arguments from passages in the Gospel as we have just now been considering, coupled with the fact that a considerable portion of the Gospel narrative is common to St. Matthew and St. Mark—a fact which has been accounted for by various suggestions, for it has been evident to all thoughtful Christians from the very beginning, but which nevertheless has not interfered with the settled belief of the Church that St. Matthew wrote this Gospel.

¹ The suggestion that the Church was at a loss for a title for this Gospel, and instead of giving it the name of its author, as in the case of the other three, ascribed it to St. Matthew because his *λόγια* were used in its compilation, is not one that readily commends itself.

6. Although the Church has retained the disputed passages as an integral part of St. Matthew's Gospel, yet it is contended by Dr. Gore that she has practically nullified this fact by ignoring the natural force of the disputed clauses, and thus "criticism and authority converge upon one result." This is a very remarkable assertion, for it amounts to saying that the Christian Church, whilst faithfully and unhesitatingly preserving the teaching of Jesus on so important a subject, has nevertheless deliberately set her own judgment above that of her Lord by ignoring the natural force of His words. It is very difficult to believe in such presumption so long as there exists the possibility of supposing that the Church's action may rather have been due to a misunderstanding of the words of Jesus—the meaning of *πορνεία*, for instance. The Bishop adduces one other example of such ecclesiastical action—viz., the retaining of Heb. vi. 4-8 in the canon of Holy Scripture, whilst denying it its natural force. This passage tells of the impossibility of renewing to repentance those who have fallen away after the full and conscious sharing in the privileges of the Christian body. But it can scarcely be claimed that this is a case in point, even though the Church may never have presumed to say of any particular sinner that he had reached the point of having utterly fallen away beyond all hope or possibility of rescue. It is obvious that the writer of this epistle does not mean that every lapse into sin constitutes the falling away of which he speaks so solemnly; and, if it is a matter of the degree of sinfulness, who but God can tell whether the border-line of possible recovery has been crossed? The truth conveyed in these words is one that is woven throughout into the very texture of this epistle,¹ and is only an echo of the words of Christ Himself.² It is the declaration that persistent sinning against the light must inevitably result in moral blindness, and that habitual and wilful violation of the conditions of eternal life must of necessity involve eternal death. This truth the Church

¹ Cf. ii. 1-3, iii. 12-19, iv. 11, x. 26-31, xii. 15-17, xii. 25.

² John xv. 2, 6.

is bound to teach, and has constantly taught; but she has not the spiritual insight to enable her to assert of any particular person that in him the last spark of life has faded away into the ashes of spiritual death, and that for him, therefore, no hope of renewal remains. Is not this a more accurate presentation of the Church's attitude towards this passage of Scripture than to say that she has denied it its natural force?

We have now examined all the evidence adduced by the representative writers to whom we have referred; and it will probably be felt that we have discovered nothing in it to justify us in departing from the belief which, until quite recent days, the Church has always held—viz., that the Apostle St. Matthew wrote the words containing the exception to the indissolubility of marriage, and that these words are the words of Jesus Christ.

A very brief examination will suffice to show that the argument for indissolubility based upon the idea that *πορνεία* can only mean pre-nuptial sin is equally invalid.

It is argued that *πορνεία* is not the specific word for adultery, and that if our Lord had meant sin after marriage He would have used the word *μοιχεία*. As a matter of fact, the word *πορνεία*, with the general meaning of "unchastity," is constantly used in the Old Testament and the New to denote the sin both of the unmarried and also of the married. In Ezek. xvi. the unfaithfulness of Israel to her Divine Husband is described by this word, and whilst this sin is stigmatized as *μοιχεία* in ver. 32,¹ it is immediately afterwards described as *πορνεία* in ver. 33.² Similarly in Hos. ii. 2 the same offence of the same woman—viz., the prophet's wife—is described, in the same verse, both as *μοιχεία* and also as *πορνεία*,³ simply for variety of expression.

In the New Testament *πορνεία* is used to denote the peculiarly gross case of adultery in the Church at Corinth with which St. Paul had to deal.⁴

¹ ἢ γυνὴ ἢ μοιχωμένη.

² ἐν τῇ πορνείᾳ σου.

³ ἔξαρῶ τὴν πορνείαν αὐτῆς ἐκ προσώπου μου, καὶ τὴν μοιχείαν αὐτῆς ἐκ μέσου μαστῶν αὐτῆς.

⁴ 1 Cor. v. 1 compared with 2 Cor. vii. 12, where the words "him that suffered the wrong" show that the woman was not a widow, but a wife.

That our Lord should have employed in the same context the general term and also the specific term to denote the sin of a married person is evidently in strict accord with Old Testament usage. In this case, moreover, the attendant circumstances make it practically certain that sin before marriage is not what is meant. It was concerning divorce, not nullity of marriage for pre-nuptial sin, that our Lord was questioned. It is also evident, from the mention of the bill of divorcement, that He is dealing with the law of divorce as set forth in Deut. xxiv. Now, Deut. xxiv. deals with offences arising after marriage, as appears from ver. 3, where it is provided that if a man has married a divorced woman, obviously with the knowledge of her past, he may in his turn divorce her if he finds in her conduct ground of aversion.

Finally, to turn our opponents' argument against themselves, it may surely be said that, in view of the fact that the penalty of death imposed by the Mosaic law for pre-nuptial and also for post-nuptial unchastity had become obsolete, if our Lord sanctioned the annulling of marriage on account of the former because of the confusion and mischief that such sin involved in the matter of the family, He surely would sanction for the very same reason the dissolution of a marriage on the ground of post-nuptial sin, seeing that the possibilities of confusion and mischief in the latter case are infinitely greater than in the former.

We may now feel satisfied that Jesus Christ has undoubtedly given His sanction to the dissolution of marriage on the ground of adultery. In this exception to the general rule of the indissolubility of marriage many of us will recognize with profound thankfulness the Divine wisdom and mercy which characterizes all that He has done. Knowing as He did the possibilities of unspeakable misery which indissoluble marriage with an utterly licentious person would entail upon a virtuous man or woman, He has left open a door of release.

In doing this our Lord has recognized no inequality as between man and woman, none as between rich and poor. In St. Mark x. 12 the case of the wife putting away her husband

is parallel with that of the husband putting away his wife ; and, knowing the care of Jesus for the poor, we can easily realize how repugnant would be to Him the idea that the mere fact of a man's inability to pay legal or travelling expenses should debar him from availing himself of the way of escape which God's goodness had provided for him. It stands to reason, therefore, that the disability now inflicted by the laws of this country upon women and upon the poor in the matter of divorce ought to be removed if our laws are to correspond with the teaching of Jesus.

The possibility of the remarriage of divorced persons is distinctly contemplated by our Lord. His decision is that the subsequent marriage is adulterous unless the divorce has been for the cause of unchastity. If there has been this sin, and divorce has resulted, the marriage is regarded by Him as having been wholly dissolved, so that both of the parties are free to marry again.¹ He makes no distinction between the guilty and the innocent in this respect, nor does He even forbid the guilty party to marry his or her partner in sin. He leaves all that alone, and we shall be wise if we follow His example. Such persons can contract a valid marriage without a religious service. It is a matter for serious consideration whether any evil arising out of allowing the sinful pair to marry would not be infinitely less than the undoubted evil of turning loose upon society two vicious persons, whom union with each other might probably have rendered less likely to do mischief to other people.

The last point that remains to be considered is how far, if at all, the principle recognized by Christ may properly be extended in its application. If He concedes that marriage is not essentially indissoluble, but that on account of human sinfulness a case may arise in which divorce is lawful, may it not be argued that there may be other causes, bred of our present social conditions, which are capable of rendering the marriage-bond as unrighteous and intolerable as it is rendered by unchastity itself, and should therefore be admissible, on grounds of morality and justice, as

¹ The law of Deut. xxiv. 3 expressly gave this permission.

valid reasons for divorce? To this question the Report of the majority of the Royal Commission on Divorce gives an affirmative answer. The Commissioners who are responsible for this Report justify their recommendations on the ground that the latitude which they advocate "is necessary in the interest of morality, as well as in the interest of justice; and in the general interests of society and the State." Their Report is framed on the basis "that the State should not regard the marriage tie as necessarily indissoluble in its nature, *or as dissoluble only on the ground of adultery*, and they recommend that the State should grant divorce for the following causes in addition to adultery—viz., desertion, cruelty, insanity, drunkenness, and imprisonment under commuted death-sentence. Now, if these incidents of human life were peculiar to our modern social conditions, and if we could reasonably infer that had they been known to Christ, He would have regarded them as rendering the marriage-bond as intolerable and unjust as it was rendered by adultery, then, indeed, it would be possible for Christian men and women, without disloyalty to Christ, to advocate the widening of the grounds of divorce so as to include these things. But, as a matter of fact, these evils are none of them peculiar to modern society; our Lord was quite familiar with them all, and was doubtless fully alive to the hardships incidental to the marriage bond arising out of these causes; yet did He not consider them to be sufficient justification for divorce, but drew the line clearly and sharply at the one cause of unchastity. Even the living death of leprosy was not, in His judgment, an adequate ground of divorce. Again, if the Lord Jesus had taken up the position that divorce was not permissible under any circumstances whatsoever, it might have been possible to suppose that He was not intending to legislate for existing social conditions, but only setting forth the true ideal to which His followers should, as far as was practicable, conform their actual legislation. But the very fact that He did, for a definite reason, make one exception to the general rule of the indissolubility of marriage shows that He was not legislating for ideal but for actual social conditions. With

a perfect knowledge of all the circumstances which might render the marriage-tie a cause of extreme hardship, He singled out the sin of unchastity, and set it quite alone by itself as the only ground on which He could permit divorce ; nor is it difficult to imagine why. If, in view of this, we decide to extend the grounds of divorce beyond the one cause which He has specified, we practically set up our own judgment as superior to His, and not to His only, but also to that of the Father whose words the Lord Jesus claimed to speak.¹

It is interesting to observe that whilst the Majority Report recommends an extension of the grounds of divorce in the interests of morality, the Minority Report emphasizes the fact that not one single witness of all the 246 who were examined was able to point to any country where, as the result of greater facilities for divorce, public morality has been promoted, the ties of family strengthened, or home life rendered purer or more settled. It would certainly appear to be the fact that human experience has at all events failed as yet to discredit the wisdom with which Jesus spoke ; and it is not too much to ask of our rulers in this Christian State that, in the legislation which may be enacted as a result of the work of the Commission, they will not ignore His teaching so as to extend the grounds of divorce beyond the limits which He has laid down, whatever protection or relief they may otherwise afford to those who have found their married life to be a source of hardship and unhappiness.

¹ St. John xii. 47-50 ; St. Luke x. 16.

