

TRIAD 2— COVETING

SOMEONE'S WIFE

5.27-30

(1) Tradition

5.27

27 You have heard that it was said,
Thou shalt not commit adultery.

27 Ἦκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη·
οὐ μοιχεύσεις.

The second Triad again begins with 'you have heard that it was said', not mentioning 'the ancients' this time, except in KJV, on the basis of printed editions, themselves based on manuscripts available at the time. But this is a good opportunity to compare the introductory phrases of the first six Triads:

Triad	Introductory Phrase
1	a You have heard that it was said to the ancients
2	b You have heard that it was said
3	c And it was said
	'Again'
4	a You have heard that it was said to the ancients
5	b You have heard that it was said
6	b <u>You have heard that it was said</u>

The pattern among introductory phrases is *a-b-c*, and 'again' *a-b-b*. The deviation of the Sixth from the expected 'And it was said' signals the end of the series of Six Triads on Torah. Deviation of the final member of a series is a regular stylistic device in Matthew, for instance with the Ninth Beatitude (5.12). Apart from the manuscript evidence, the pattern shows us that the words 'to the men of old time' do not belong in 5.27, so you can cross them out if they're in your bible.

After the introductory formula, a second traditional teaching follows: "'Thou shalt not commit adultery'", the Seventh Commandment (Ex 20.14; Dt 5.18). There isn't a secondary or parallel citation this time, as there was in the First Triad.

(2) Diagnosis

5.28

28 And I'm saying to you that
every male who keeps on staring at a woman
to covet her
has already committed adultery on her
in his heart.

28 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι
πᾶς ὁ βλέπων γυναῖκα
πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν⁴⁵
ἤδη ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν
ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

Jesus again introduces his commentary with an emphatic legitimation formula. Translating the word *de* (δέ) as 'and' rather than 'but'— as we saw in 5.21 and again in 5.22 (four times)— is probably better than 'but', because Jesus is not contradicting the commandment not to commit adultery. 'And *I'm* telling you' draws attention both to his authority and to the further point that he wishes to make about the topic of the Commandment.

As in the previous Triad, he starts starts with a generalization: 'everyone who' (*pas ho*, πᾶς ὁ, 5.28, cf 5.21)— plus a participle implying continuous or repeated action— not just, 'everyone who looks at a woman', but 'everyone who keeps looking at a woman'. This 'looking' has a purpose— literally, 'towards coveting her'.

'Covet' is the proper translation of *epithymēsai* (ἐπιθυμῆσαι), not just 'desire'. True, the word is often if not usually translated 'desire', but Jesus is referring to the Tenth Commandment (Ex. 20.17), which has the same wording, so we have to translate it as 'covet' here, if we want to capture his meaning. Please change it in your bible.

It's good to review what the Tenth Commandment says:

Ex 20.17 ...You shall not covet (*epithymēseis*, ἐπιθυμήσεις) your neighbor's *woman*⁴⁶ ... or anything that is your neighbor's.

So it turns out that there actually is a secondary or parallel citation, as in the First Triad!

⁴⁵ This could be translated either 'in order to desire her' or 'in order that she desires/becomes lustful.' But the context is generally androcentric.

⁴⁶ Most languages, including Hebrew and Greek, don't make a distinction between 'woman' and 'wife'. 'Wife' is meant whenever 'belonging to' is indicated— eg, 'the woman of your neighbor'.

This connection with the Tenth Commandment is completely ignored— never even mentioned— in any commentary I've read, including OSB. Most commentaries discuss how adultery now 'includes' desire and then, having thus condemned 'the God-given mutual attraction of men and women', they have to squirm out of it. But the fact that Jesus is talking about the *Tenth* Commandment as well as the Seventh simplifies everything.

There's so much to unpack here, because the cultural context is very foreign to ours. First of all, the word 'everyone': in Greek, you use a masculine singular, especially with a general word like *pas* (πᾶς), 'every(one)' or 'all', to refer to an unspecified person who could be of either sex. Therefore we can read Jesus' word as referring to 'everyone', whether male or female. If you're a heterosexual woman, you make allowances for the sexist language of Jesus' day and just switch it around: 'every woman who looks at a male', etc. But Jesus is actually being more specific. In fact he's saying, 'every *male* who keeps looking at a [*married*] woman, to covet her'. We know she's a *married* woman, because that is the point of the Tenth Commandment, which he's directly alluding to.

Secondly, the word translated 'who looks' (*blepōn*, βλέπων), like the word for 'going around getting angry all the time' in the previous Triad, is a present participle, suggesting continuous or repeated action. So here's a guy who 'keeps staring at' another man's woman. Not just somebody who 'looks with desire' at a pretty girl (or boy). As before, Jesus is diagnosing an attitude problem.

In Jesus' honor-shame context, people had little concern for psychological things like 'desire'. What counted was what you did, and what others thought about what you did. Community approval or disapproval functioned as your 'external conscience'. To a great degree, thoughts were simply offstage, and words referring to internal states generally connoted an external expression as well. So again, here's a guy who isn't just having 'lustful thoughts', but 'staring' (a repeated activity) because he actually 'covets' another man's wife. 'Coveting' didn't just signify wanting, but *even trying to take something*. For that reason, the word is often best translated 'to steal', with the nuance perhaps that you haven't *quite* managed to do so yet. So Jesus is saying, 'Any guy who keeps staring at someone's wife in order to take her.'

Such a man, Jesus observes, 'has already committed adultery in his heart'.

Actually that's pretty much a no-brainer; what's supposed to be so revolutionary about it? But again, we need to understand the word translated as, 'commit adultery' (*moicheuō*, μοιχεύω).

For us, you commit 'adultery' when one or the other or both members of a sexual couple is somebody else's spouse. The same thing is called 'fornication' if neither party is married; the difference then is whether the relationship is strictly between the two parties, or whether spouses are in the background. For us, 'adultery' is the ultimate romantic betrayal, the perennial subject of pulp fiction and country-western songs. Culturally, we no longer often use the word 'fornication'; if two people decide to take their relationship in a sexual direction, that's perfectly normal and it's their business.

However, we assume that Jesus, being old-fashioned, addresses both fornication and adultery in this Triad, but he does not, as we'll see.

In English, both men and women can 'commit adultery', not because the English word 'adultery' has to do with 'adults', but because it comes from the Latin *ad-alterare*, 'to change or alter', and hence 'to corrupt'. You can 'adulterate' or corrupt the privacy and commitments of a marriage. But the Greek word that Jesus is using, *moicheuō* (μοιχεύω) contemplates a slightly different idea. Apparently, *moicheuō* is derived from the vulgar word *omeichō* (ὀμείχω), 'piss'.⁴⁷

This is very significant. In the patriarchal society of the ancient Middle East, a man who seduces a woman was contemptuously said to 'piss' on her, and she was said to be 'pissed on', just as with the word 'marry' (*gamēō*, γαμέω)— a man 'marries', while a woman is always 'married off'. The verbs relating to male-female relationships are always active for the man, as here with *moicheuein*, and passive for the woman, as with *moicheuthēnai*, five verses hence, at 5.32. The man 'pisses on'; the woman is 'pissed on'. But what is this about?

For us, pissing is mostly a bathroom function. But peasants would have been less squeamish about bodily functions and were quite aware of how animals mark out territory by leaving a 'mark' on it— often by pissing. That is what the man is already doing in his heart: He is 'marking' another man's most personal property as his own. This is the exact *sense and nature* of the *dishonor* that adultery was felt to be. It's a violation of the most intimate family boundaries, and a form of theft.⁴⁸

So Jesus is not saying that this guy who keeps staring at another man's wife, 'has already committed adultery with her', as if she were, or might be, a collaborator (though

⁴⁷ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grec* (Klincksieck: Paris, 1999), s.v.; my translation.

⁴⁸ I seem to recall reading from somewhere that adulterers were sometimes contemptuously referred to as 'dogs', but I can't find the reference.

she may be, or he may want her to be). The man who keeps staring at her in order to take her has 'already *pissed on her in his heart*'.

So here's a man 'who keeps staring at a woman in order to take her', and in doing so, is dishonoring, insulting, her husband. Such an insult is going to lead to serious reprisal, counter-reprisal, feuding, murder, and so forth.

Jesus is not saying that every human being who looks at someone of the opposite sex with desire is 'already committing adultery'. He's being quite specific. Every *male* who keeps staring at a *married* woman in order to covet/take her 'has already *pissed on her— and hence on her husband— in his heart*'.

'Pissing on' another man's wife did not dishonor the woman so much as her husband. In Jesus' society, a woman tended to embody 'shame' more than 'honor'—shame as passivity and concern for the honor of others. Moreover,

Since it is males who embody gender honor, and since only male equals can challenge for honor, a female cannot and does not dishonor a wife by having sexual relations with her husband, nor can a married man dishonor his [own] wife by having sexual relations with some other female. A husband's relations with a prostitute do not dishonor the honorable wife.⁴⁹

Honor is primarily a male concern; that which aggressively defends honor and seeks greater honor.⁵⁰ And when someone dishonored you, that required satisfaction. To dishonor a man by taking his wife would even require bloodshed. And that is really the danger here.

So in this Triad, 'adultery' means *to dishonor another male by having sexual relations with his wife*. That definition is very specific, and it determines the overall meaning of this Triad.

Jesus is not just addressing 'the passion of lust' here. He's talking about someone who keeps staring at a married woman to take her. This is not about the ultimate romantic betrayal; this is about **honor**, and it's about **property**:

Ex 20.17 Thou shalt not covet/desire thy neighbour's house... thy neighbor's **woman**,... *nor anything that belongs to thy neighbor*.

To prevent feuding and endless bloodshed, Dt 22.22 required both the adulterer and the married woman he seduced to be killed.

⁴⁹ Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the New Testament* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1992), p 122.

⁵⁰ Bruce Malina, *New Testament World*, 49.

However, if the woman was unmarried, the dishonor was not so great; a man who slept with her either had to marry her or, if her father absolutely refused to give her to him, he had to pay her father the bride-price he would have had to pay to marry her anyway (Ex 22.16-17). Or, he had to marry her, and could never divorce her (Dt 22.29).

In an honor-based society, Jesus is pointing to the social danger of *coveting (taking) a man's wife*. Leaving your dog-mark on another man's household would not just indicate that you lacked respect and good sense or couldn't control your desires or were a slave to passion or any of the stories we always tell to make sense of this verse. By 'coveting' a man's wife even in your heart, you already dishonor *that man*, and whether you succeed in consummating your desire or not, you will provoke *violence*.

Jesus is not promulgating a new, 'interior' law as opposed to the old, 'fleshly' Torah. He is not 'expanding' the commandment against adultery so that it now 'includes' desires or 'thoughts'. The Tenth Commandment already said, 'You will not *covet* your... your neighbor's wife...' (Ex 20.17), and coveting (literally, 'desiring') is a *thought* as well as an act. Jesus is not really even speaking of 'thoughts' here at all. He's talking about 'looking' and 'taking', and he will speak in the next verses of 'eyes' and 'hands'. His interest, as usual, is in social behaviors and social situations, not in 'spirituality'. The issue of 'thoughts' is present, but secondary.

(3) Transforming Initiative

5.29-30a

29 But if your right eye

traps you,

pluck it out and throw it away from you;

29 εἰ δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ὁ δεξιὸς

σκανδαλίζει σε,

ἔξελε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ·

In the section on murder and anger (5.21-26), Jesus began his therapeutic Prescription with the words, 'if *therefore*' (5.23). Here, after describing a situation where a male finds himself trapped by his 'right eye' into dishonoring someone, Jesus prescribes, ' *but if*' (*ei de, ei de*). That is the expression he will use to introduce the Prescription section in most of the remaining Triads.

We can translate *de* (δέ) as 'but' in this case. As I mentioned above, it's a word that signals a turning point in the rhetoric, a shift of topic, a disjunction, but not always a strong one; sometimes weak enough to mean simply 'and also', as we saw at 5.21 and .22.

But we have to be careful! At this point, KJV reads, '[he] hath committed adultery with her already in his heart: *and* if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out'. This turns the present verse (5.29) into a separate, stand-alone commandment— 'and if your right eye traps you, pluck it out'. But this 'and' *coordinates* the present commandment with the foregoing *observation* ('everyone who looks in order to covet', 5.28), and turns it into an *implied imperative* also.

That's how we arrive at the idea that Jesus is forbidding you to ever think a lustful thought. And since lustful thoughts arise fairly often in human beings, we turn Jesus into a guilt-tripper who mostly threatens people with 'eternal Hell Fire' for the least little *thought*. And then, to avoid that, we have to go to all kinds of lengths to explain just *how much* is a 'God-given natural desire' and therefore ok, or not (OSB).

More modern translations, including the NKJV (ie, the OSB), simply drop the word *de* ('but') altogether. This severs all link with the foregoing material, but it has the same effect of turning the passage into two parallel statements:

- 'Whoever looks... has already committed adultery';
- 'If your right eye... causes you to sin... pluck it out'.

Again, the *observation* in 5.28 turns into an implied *imperative*.

But Jesus isn't saying that. He's saying, 'pluck out and throw away' your right eye *if* it entraps you. Into doing what? Into 'staring at a married woman with intent to take her'— *because* you're already dishonoring her husband in your heart, and 'sure as shootin' (literally), there are going to be consequences.

Jesus says, 'if your right eye *traps* you (*skandalizei, σκανδαλίζει*) you'. Here, the KJV has 'if your right eye *offends* you'. NKJV, OSB and others have, 'if your right eye *causes you to sin*'. NASB, NIV and others bibles have 'if your right eye *makes you stumble*'. The problem is, not one of these says what Jesus actually said!

A *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον) is not an 'offense' or a 'stumbling-block'. Where do such ideas even come from?? It is, quite simply, a 'trap' or an 'enticement'. Jesus is saying, 'if your right eye *traps* you'— and you find yourself already dishonoring someone in your heart— then you have to *do* something drastic about it (5.29-30). He pre-

scribes four actions: 'take it out', 'throw it away'; 'cut it off', 'throw it away'.

Jesus said, 'You have heard, Thou shalt not leave thy mark on another man's wife. And *I'm* telling you that if you keep staring at a woman to take her, you've already made your mark on her in your heart. *But if* your right eye traps you like that, gouge it out and toss it away'. The connection that the translations keep omitting, is actually the *point* Jesus is making, 'But if you do find yourself in this situation, do this...'.

Jesus is *not* saying, 'Moses said, No adultery, but I'm saying, Thou shalt not ever even have a lustful thought'. He is giving a *positive imperatives* to *do* something if you find yourself repeatedly staring at another man's wife— that is, if you find yourself already in the trap. As in the previous Triad, the burden is on 'you'— in this case, the male whose eye has 'trapped' him— to *do* something about it.

Jesus does not blame the woman— unlike, for example, Sirach (Si 23.22-27; 26.9,11; 42.9-14), or the ten guys in India who gang-raped and killed a woman who wasn't wearing a veil in 2013. Males must be responsible for themselves, and must exercise self-control. Male infidelity is not excused, and male power is restricted. A woman has her own integrity and men must treat her with dignity— but even that's not specifically the focus here. She will be protected, when her husband is respected. Heaven's regime simply does not allow or excuse men to behave as they like, and then blame women for 'provocation'. And don't mess around in another guy's household!

Mediterraneans in Jesus' day usually envisioned human existence in terms of three 'zones of interaction'. The zone of *emotion and thought* involved the eyes, the heart, liver, innards, etc. The zone of *speech* involved the mouth, ears, tongue, lips, and throat. The zone of *purpose and action* involved the hands, arms, fingers, legs, and feet. To injure one of these bodily zones is to dishonor someone. Jesus addresses the act of 'staring' (5.28), that is, the zone of *emotion and thought*, by speaking of the *eye*.

Plucking out the 'right' eye brings to mind 2Sm 11.2, where Nahash the Ammonite said to the men of Jabesh-Gilead: "'On this condition will I make a treaty with you, that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel.'"

Jesus is therefore urging his audience to dishonor *themselves* rather than the woman's husband by plucking out their right eye, as Nahash would have dishonored Israel. Even that would be preferable to dishonoring another

man by staring at his woman with intent to take her.⁵¹
The peace of the community is that important.

Explanation

5.30b

Why should you pluck out your *eye*? Because dishonoring yourself by throwing away (*ballō*, βάλλω) your right eye is better than dishonoring another man and ending up thrown out (*ballō*, βάλλω) full-body into *gehenna*, the burning trash pit of Jerusalem Renewed.

As in the previous Triad, this supporting Explanation appeals to self-interest. This time, the subordinate clause is introduced by ‘for’ or ‘because’ (*gar*, γάρ) instead of ‘lest’.

for it's better for you
that one of your members perish
and your whole body
not be thrown
into gehenna.

συμφέρει γάρ σοι
ἵνα ἀπόληται ἐν τῶν μελῶν σου
καὶ μὴ ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου
βληθῆ
εἰς γέενναν.

Jesus said, ‘every male who keeps *staring*’ (5.28). ‘Staring’ is an activity of the zone of *emotion and thought*, and that’s why one must pluck out the *eye*, which is part of that zone.

But as we mentioned, ‘coveting’ (i.e., ‘desiring’), in first-century Mediterranean society, was not only a thought but always involved an attempt to take what one desired, Jesus repeats the Prescription with its Explanation in terms of the *hand*, that is, the zone of *purposive action* as well:

30 and if your right hand
traps you,
cut it off and throw it away from you,

for it's better for you
that one of your members perish
and your whole body
not go away
to gehenna.

30 καὶ εἰ ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεῖρ
σκανδαλίζει σε,
ἔκκοψον αὐτήν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ·
συμφέρει γάρ σοι
ἵνα ἀπόληται ἐν τῶν μελῶν σου
καὶ μὴ ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου
εἰς γέενναν
ἀπέλθῃ.

‘If your right *hand* traps you’ means, ‘if you find yourself reaching out to take’.

In both cases (eye and hand), Jesus uses hyperbole to call for radical and decisive action.

In the case of the eye, one either casts away the eye, or is ‘cast away’ into gehenna.

In the case of the hand, one either casts away the hand, or ‘goes away’ (*apelthēi*, ἀπέλθῃ) to the eschatological trash dump. All that does not belong in the restored Jerusalem will be left to burn there.

In the Teaching on the Mountain, Jesus constantly redefines honor. He hasn’t said anything about what to do if someone marks *your* woman like that. But if you want to be honorable yourself, ‘you’ must undertake the vigorous action against *yourself*. The answer is not to make women wear veils, for example, but to stop assuming *you* have the right to stare and grope and possess.

All the Triads address *actions* (cf. 5.28 with 5.32; 5.34, 37; 5.39; and 5.44). This one addresses *males*, and it has to do with humbling *themselves* in order to keep peace in the community.

When we take the second member of the Triad— ‘every man who looks at a married woman in order to covet her has already made his dog-mark on her husband’s household in his heart’— as a broad and general negative prohibition against entertaining any kind of sexual thoughts, we end up having to explain how Jesus didn’t ‘really mean’ the ‘God-given attraction of men and women’, and then we have to further explain what he ‘really meant’. We then end up with a spirituality that

⁵¹ Again, OSB’s comment is unintelligible: ‘vivid imagery, not literally... to remove an eye would be to reproach the Creator’, citing 18.8-9 and Mk 9.43-48, which say nothing at all about reproaching the Creator.

emphasizes passions and tries (often not altogether successfully) to avoid ‘thoughts’. Moreover, the ‘examples’ of plucking out your eye and cutting off your hand only serve to reinforce the negative message, since we’re not about to mutilate ourselves,⁵² and yet we can’t help but have sexual thoughts. We turn Jesus’ good news into an impossibly exacting, guilt-inducing prohibition, and we leave all kinds of questions like, ‘how much is too much’ unanswered.

But Jesus is describing a very specific attitude problem and corresponding activity. When we miss the social location of his teaching, we miss the ways he’s addressing the more basic issue of *pride* through the lens of honor, shame, and desire. The impulse of desire is quite ordinary and natural, and it easily ‘traps’ us. Jesus knows that ‘thoughts’ are common. He prescribes therapeutic or corrective *action* to obviate acts of dishonor that destroy communities.

And by addressing the issue of what we somewhat improperly translate as ‘adultery’ in terms of the Tenth Commandment— that is, in terms of *property*— Jesus exposes the real concern of the Seventh Commandment and shows how it has much broader application.

What you have to overcome, gentlemen, is your *sense of entitlement*.

TRIAD 3— DIVORCE 5.31-32

(1) Tradition 5.31

The third Triad treats of divorce, and does so in terms of ‘adultery’. Thus it’s closely related to the previous Triad. It begins with the usual introductory formula, although shortened here to a minimal, ‘and (*de*) it was said’. In the third of the Four Triads on Traditional Practices (6.1-18), the introductory formula will be shortened in a similar way, and that Triad is related to the preceding one just as this one is related to the Second Triad (both on prayer). This pattern of a third related to a second does not seem to be repeated in the Four Triads on Proverbial Sayings (two masters, 6.24; 7.1, do not judge), but the second of those has an introductory phrase that’s different from the others in that series, as well.

The Tradition in the present Triad is again taken from the Torah (Dt 24.1-4), but it is not quoted exactly:

⁵² And in any case, when Origen did so, he was condemned by the Church.

31 And it was said,
whoever would release his woman,
let him give her a notice of setting apart.

31 Ἐρρέθη δέ·
ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ,
δότης αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον.

(Dt 24.1-4 literally says, “If man (*ish*) takes a wife. . . and he writes her a bill of divorcement. . . .”)

Jesus begins his commentary on the Torah’s prescription, as before, with the legitimation formula, ‘And *I’m* telling you’.

Note that he directs his commentary to ‘every male’— who engages in the activity, again using a present masculine participle based on the verb used in the Torah passage: ‘every man, whoever is dismissing his wife...’.

(2) Diagnosis 5.32

32 And *I’m* telling you that
every man who is releasing his woman
except for reason of fornication
makes her to get marked on,
and whoever might marry a released woman,
is making that kind of a mark.

32 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι
πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ
παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας
ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι,
καὶ ὃς ἐὰν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ,
μοιχᾶται.

The Diagnosis is that everyone who’s ‘releasing’ his wife, is forcing her— and in view of what we learned in the previous Triad— that means, *himself*— to get ‘pissed on’ (Mt 5.32ab) *because she has no choice in society at the time but to remarry*— especially if she has kids. And, by the same token, if he marries a ‘released’ woman, he’s ‘leaving his mark’ on her previous husband’s household as well (and go back to the Second Triad for that the problem with that).

This assumes a complex of social practices and a view of marriage that are not at all familiar to us.

In the 21st century developed world, marriage has become the union of two individuals who love each other and want to make a common life. Law and culture largely (but not entirely) still recognize them as individual consumers, and even after their marriage they may well retain their own bank accounts, cars, careers, titles to real estate, and even their own names, whether they have joint accounts or joint ownership or not. They may decide to make large purchases, go on vacations, or do anything else, jointly or severally. They get married at their own desire and they freely divorce at their own desire. Children are a complication, of course, but the couple may get married with no intention of ever having children— that, too, is purely a matter of their individual choice. In our society, until recently, the arrangement called ‘marriage’ was understood to be an arrangement between one man and one woman. However, given the strictly individualistic nature of the institution in our society, we are extending it to same-sex couples as well. At the same time, polygyny (but not polyandry) is gaining favor in Utah and even on tv; and I myself knew a *polyandrous* arrangement that lasted for some years, although the people involved weren’t actually married. It dissolved without recrimination when the parties moved on.

By contrast, in Jesus’ world, marriage was not really between individuals at all, but between families. In a high-mortality context, it was very important that families reproduce. Families were eager to see their children marry and produce offspring, but since marriage entailed the sharing of property, which belonged to the extended family or clan more than to the individual householder, marriage offered important ways of improving a family’s standing if favorable matches could be arranged. Marriages were not generally undertaken for love.

In Uganda— a society not all that different from Jesus’ first-century Mediterranean world— a friend of mine became very interested in a girl who was attractive, intelligent, creative, and from a good family. She was apparently also quite aloof, which my friend found fascinating. And, where all others had failed, he actually managed to get to know her and, as it turned out, they came to like each other a good deal. But after a few weeks, he had to tell her that he had no family and was very poor. She broke off the relationship immediately because her family would not have accepted him. Their marriage would have brought ‘shame’ on them— that is, a loss of social position and connections.

When a suitable match is found, a family offers a male. If accepted, then in company with his family, he must pay a heavy bride-price to take the desired female from her father’s clan. A friend in Uganda needs to come up with seven cows, which amounts to about three full years’ wages, before he can formally marry. The wedding then integrates the new couple into their larger extended families and formalizes the sharing of property. Marriage was not and is not in such societies a relationship between ‘one man and one woman’— that is a romantic fantasy peculiar to late capitalist individualism— but a relationship between two extended families undertaken with a view to their political, economic, and social honor.

Divorce, the dissolution of a marriage, entailed the separation of spouses with the understanding that previous marriage arrangements were no longer binding. If a male were married and another woman came along who offered better connections, divorce was easy enough. Moses said one only had to give a notice of setting apart.

The language of Deuteronomy regarding divorce is somewhat ambiguous:

Dt 24.1 ...if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her...

The rabbis of Jesus’ day therefore argued over the conditions under which a man could legally divorce. The *Mishnah* reports three positions. The Shammai the Elder, who lived from around 50 BC to AD 30 and was thus an exact contemporary of Jesus, held that:

A man may divorce his wife *only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity*, since it is said, ‘Because he has found *unseemliness* in her regarding something’ (Dt 24.1).

Shammai emphasized the term ‘*unseemliness*’ (somewhat vague in Hebrew), interpreting it to mean only the extreme case of ‘unchastity’. Jesus seems to side with Shammai when he names *porneia* (sexual immorality) at 5.32 (cf 19.9) as the only grounds for divorce.

By contrast, Hillel the Elder, who lived from about the time of Mark’s gospel (70s AD) onward, held that a man may divorce his wife

...even if she (just) broke his plate, since it is said, ‘Because he has found unseemliness in her regarding something’ (Dt 24.1).

Just about anything a woman might do could serve as grounds for divorce. The Pharisees seem to have this position in mind in Matthew: ‘Is it authorized for a man to divorce his wife *for any reason at all (kata pasan aitian)?*’ (Mt 19.3).

Rabbi Aqiba (Akiva), who lived from around AD 50 to 135, had yet another opinion:

Even if he found someone prettier, since it is said, 'if she later *finds no favor* in his eyes' (Dt 24.1).

The woman herself doesn't have to do anything. Somehow, she's blameworthy, or at least has to bear the brunt, if her husband wants a 'better deal'. That's why, as I said, if another woman came along who offered better connections at court, more land, or whatever— divorce was easy enough.

However, there were consequences. Divorce insulted (challenged the honor of) the former wife's family, and typically led to feuding. We're not talking about romantic betrayal but the tearing apart of whole social and economic networks as well as grievously injuring the reputation of the woman's father and brothers (their women are 'no good!')— and this had a tendency to make people very angry indeed.

In 19.6, Jesus will say that a married couple is 'no longer two, but one flesh.' He sees marriage as a 'blood' relationship like the relationship to mother and father (19.5) or to siblings. You can't dissolve a blood relation. God alone determines who your parents are, and likewise, where marriage was undertaken in obedience to parents and in view of family needs, parental and family choices were readily seen as willed by God. Thus it is God who 'joins together' in marriage and the bond is indissoluble.

This is not our world today, and attempts (for instance, among some fundamentalist groups) to live as if it were are no less individualistic and idiosyncratic than the gay marriages that merely mirror their own practices.

But Jesus has said that, except for cases of 'unchastity' (*porneia*, πορνεία), divorce causes the divorced woman to get 'marked', in the sense I talked about above. And again, when a woman gets 'marked', it's the *husband* who is dishonored. So Jesus is saying that when a man divorces his wife, he is making her get 'marked'. Since she's *his* wife, that means he is drawing insult and dishonor upon *himself*.

The man is acting like a pimp and offering his own wife for, or forcing her to undergo, sexual union with other males. This is so because in Jesus' (and Matthew's) context, a woman had no choice but to be associated with a man— i.e., husband, father, or brother— in order to survive. If a man dismisses his wife, she *might* return to her father's house or to a brother— *if* she has one who is still alive, and *if* they're willing and able to take her in— but ultimately she had to find a new husband.

In Uganda, a similar society, it was common enough that fathers and brothers could not support a divorced fe-

male, especially one with kids to feed. Yet a single woman, especially one with children, would not survive on the streets, so she *had* to remarry. Yet— Jesus assumes— a union that God himself created is not something that a mere written notice can cancel (see 19.4-6). So when she remarries, she will get 'pissed on'— and *this insults 'you'*. By the same token, a man who marries a woman who has been dismissed 'leaves his mark on' some other '*you*'. All of this pimping is deeply shameful.

Part of the concern here in 5.31 (and in 19.9 as well), is with divorce and *remarriage*, or even divorce *in order to* remarry (to acquire higher status, etc). This dishonored the father and other males of her family by a mistreatment of their daughter/sister. Again, that would inevitably lead to feuding.

The phrase 'except for unchastity' (5.32)— not found in the parallel Mk 10.11-12— may refer to general sexual misconduct, or perhaps to the degrees of kinship catalogued in Lv 18.6-23 (which is directed to males), and forbidden for marriage. At any rate, some scholars surmise that Matthew's church may have known non-Israelite tribes whose map of 'incest' was somewhat different, and that the occasional cousin-marriage had to be dissolved. There is no proof, but it may be true. On the other hand, if it does refer to the wife's sexual misconduct, the husband has already been 'pissed on'; his honor would be preserved by terminating the relationship in which he has been dishonored. This apparently was what Joseph had in mind in 1.19.

Such are some of the meanings of divorce within the cultures that Jesus and Matthew inhabited. Returning to Matthew's narrative as such, we should recognize that Jesus is not 'forbidding divorce'. He is pointing out *what divorce is, within the honor-shame culture of his day*. It's up to us to work out the implications in our own culture, but it should be obvious from what we've seen that the difference between modern and ancient societies does not allow simple answers.

We make a big issue today of the fact that God made of the two, 'one flesh' (19.3-12). But in part, that's because the 'flesh' of sex and progeny are almost all that's left of the very deep and thick economic and social relations that marriage once entailed. In our society, as I mentioned at the outset, marriages are undertaken by individual consumers, women do not have to be attached to a man to survive, and we simply don't experience divorce as an insult to the woman's father and brothers, as people in Jesus' culture did. Nor in most cases does it entail the tearing apart of a deep and wide social and economic fabric. If I divorce today, I will still keep my job; nothing will change there. If a man divorced in Jesus' day, the

two families would no longer have common fields to work or any of the other things that peasants cooperate in doing.

I believe most of us would see the modern arrangement as a net benefit, not as a loss. Yet because marriage in our culture has become fundamentally individualistic, it has become harder to sustain. We also struggle over whether the 'one flesh' designation can be applied to same-sex couples, Muslim polygamists, and so forth.

But none of this is on Jesus' horizon. As mentioned, adultery is 'leaving one's mark' on another male's household. The man 'marks'; the woman is 'marked'. English bibles always translate, 'everyone who divorces his wife... makes her commit adultery'. This suggests that he makes the woman become an *active* party to adultery. That's absurd on the face of it. What if she becomes a nun? Is she still an adulteress? Such a translation/interpretation in fact is harmful to women. But when a woman *must* find a new man because of social conditions, the divorcing husband is forcing her to get 'marked' by another man— and that dog is marking 'your own' household!

(3) Transforming Initiative [missing]

Surprisingly, there's no Prescription in this Triad. Jesus has cited a Tradition (Dt 24.1-4) and diagnosed a problem, but there's nothing about a new behavior to counteract it. This is the only place in all Fourteen Triads where this occurs. Why this glaring omission? and why here? Clearly, we expect something like the first Triad in Mt 5.24: 'Go, and be reconciled to your wife'.

In fact, fifteen or twenty years after Jesus said these words, Paul wrote about this same subject. He said,

1Co 7.10-11 To the married I command— not I, but the Lord— a wife should not be *separated* (*chōrīsthēnai*, χωρισθῆναι) from her husband; but if she is *separated*, she should remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband; and the husband is not to abandon (*aphienai*, ἀφιέναι) his wife.

Interestingly, KJV translates this as if the woman were the one responsible for what is done to her: 'let not the woman *depart* from her husband, but if she *depart*...' (NKJV and OSB retain this misleading and sexist reading). But Paul is actually talking about divorce in the way that Jesus did— it's something a man does to a woman, and the verb concerning her is passive: she '*is separated*' (*chōrīsthēnai*, χωρισθῆναι).

Paul says this teaching is from Jesus, not from himself (1Co 7.10). And his wording seems in some ways to echo the teaching here— he says 'separate' (*chōrizō* χωρίζω) twice, where Jesus says 'release' (*apolyo*, ἀπολύω) twice (Mt 5.32ab). But where Matthew's Jesus is silent about any Prescription, Paul orders: 'let her remain unmarried, or let her be reconciled to her husband' (1Co 7.11). Even though the word 'reconciled' (*katallagētō*, καταλλάγητω) here reminds us of the command to 'be reconciled' (*diallagēthi*, διαλλάγηθι) with a brother who 'had something against you' in 5.24, this puts the burden on the woman— she is the one who has to be reconciled. Yet Paul seems to preserve the form of the Prescription that the triadic structure of the Teaching on the Mountain leads us to expect here in Matthew— and he does add that 'the *husband* is not to abandon his wife'.

If Jesus had continued speaking of therapeutic measures to the husband, he would have been placing the responsibility for reconciling on him. Maybe he actually did that, and maybe Matthew even quoted it, and maybe a very early scribe skipped it. We have no way of knowing. We only have Paul's words to fit somewhat into this spot.

Yet there's an important point to be gained from the fact that each of the units in the main part of the Teaching on the Mountain has the same triadic structure. The structure itself makes it clear that Jesus is not issuing a legalistic prohibition here, but pointing to reconciliation, however implicitly. Paul himself explicitly asserts that his teaching against divorce is *from the Lord*, and yet immediately allows divorce in the case of irreconcilable religious differences (1Co 7.12-16):

1Co 7.15 If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you.