

Adultery Against Whom in Mark 10:11?

Mark 10:10-11 (NIV): "*When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. 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.'*"

Pharisees, in a vain attempt to tempt Jesus, asked him one of the most controversial questions of his day. "*Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife.*" Matthew's account adds, "*for every cause.*" Underlying the question was an ongoing debate among the Jews as to what was the "cause." What all did it include? What legitimate reason or reasons would allow "a man" to divorce his wife? The question dealt only with what a husband could or could not do. There was no concern for the wife.

None of the Pharisees were able to give a definitive answer from the Law. The Law of Moses was not itself definitive as to cause. According to the Mosaic regulations, a man could divorce his wife for any "cause" that came under the expression "unseemly." If a man found in his wife anything that displeased him because he judged it "unseemly" he could merely send her away with a bill of divorcement in her hand (Deut. 24:1-4).

In the question presented to Jesus, it is not consistent to say any divorce under consideration was limited to adultery by the wife. Had that been the case both adulterers would have been killed (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). The "cause" issue with the Jews took on a much broader perspective. Jesus effectively dismissed their pet positions by not only showing the original intent of marriage, but explained why it was allowed by the Lord. The "causes" on which a man could rely to divorce his wife often were absurd.

"Some of the rabbis boldly taught that a man had a perfect right to dismiss his wife, if he found another woman whom he liked better, or who was more beautiful (Mishnah, GiTTin, 14:10). Here are some other specifications taken from the same book: "The following women may be divorced: She who violates the Law of Moses, e.g. causes her husband to eat food which has not been tithed. . . . She who vows, but does not keep her vows. . . . She who goes out on the street with her hair loose, or spins in the street, or converses (flirts) with any man, or is a noisy woman. What is a noisy woman? It is one who speaks in her own house so loud that the neighbors may hear her." It would be easy to extend the list, for the Mishna and rabbinic writings are full of such laws." (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

In some instances the Law required a man to keep a wife all the days of his life. He could never divorce her. The Mosaic regulations dealt with a man who falsely accused his wife of not being a virgin when they married. When proven to be falsely accusing her he was chastised by the elders of the people and sentenced to live with her without the possibility of ever putting her away (Deut. 22:18-19).

Mark does not record the Lord's full response to the Pharisees. He does not include the exception clause in Matthew's account (Matt. 19:9). However, when he and his disciples were alone, they asked him to explain this further. The explanation Jesus gave

privately his disciples harmonizes and explains what Matthew records: *divorce and remarriage without fornication is adultery*.

It was then that Jesus did what the Pharisees would not dare to do -- give a plain and unequivocal reply. He gave a simple answer: *divorce (by either husband or wife) and remarriage to another is adultery*. Jesus established here that a man could commit adultery *against* his wife by putting her away and remarrying. This, the Jewish teachers did not believe.

The rabbis taught that an unfaithful wife could commit adultery *against* her husband. That was not a problem for them. However, a husband who had sexual relations with the wife of another man only committed adultery only *against* the other man. They did not conceive the possibility that a husband could be guilty of adultery *against* his wife. Jesus effectively and straightforwardly refuted this completely.

The phrase "committeth adultery *against* her" means adultery against his wife -- not the woman he married after putting his wife away. The "her" is the "she herself" whom her husband sinfully divorces (verse 11). "She herself" is not the second wife. Neither is the "her" of verse 11.

Verse 11 deals with a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman. It is "his" wife that is divorced and it is "he" who then will "marry another" and the "her" against whom adultery is committed cannot be the "another" -- the second wife.

Verse 12 reverses the situation. Now "she" commits adultery against "her" husband by doing the same thing to him. Things are reversed. The "she" that commits adultery (verse 12) is the "her" against whom the husband committed adultery (verse 11). The "she" in verse 12 is not the second woman whom the man sinfully married. Therefore, the second woman is not the "her" against whom a husband committed adultery.

"She" and "her" are pronouns which take the place of a noun. Pronouns agree with their antecedents in gender, person, and number. The antecedent of a pronoun is the word for which the pronoun stands. By rule of grammar, "her" and "she" in both verses have as their antecedents "his wife" whom he sinfully puts away.