

Matthew's Gospel - Chapter 19

Divorce & its implications

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Hello and welcome to the latest in our series of talks on Matthew's Gospel. Today we are looking at chapter 19 in respect, primarily, of the subject of "Divorce and its implications." I must say right away that this is a most difficult subject because of both the sensitivities around it and the prevailing no fault divorce culture of our society. We will find it helpful however to keep in mind that these are the words and teachings of our Lord Jesus when He was here on earth; and as He is the Creator and Upholder of all things, who wants to bless us immeasurably and only has our best interests at heart so then we do well to consider what He requires from us. I want to stress that His teaching is for our blessing and is not intended to be some kind of harsh rules that we need to live by. We also do well to keep in mind that when we address difficult things from God's word that do not fit with our own wants and desires or the culture of the day, that we cannot ignore them or openly reject them in order to appear loving and accepting so as not to cause offense. The most loving thing we can ever do for someone is to explain to them the counsel of God as revealed in His Word. The very basis of the Gospel is that we have all sinned and come short of the Glory of God; and that we will end up in a Christless eternity unless we accept the Salvation on offer through faith in the work of Christ on the cross of Calvary. To allow someone to think there is any other way to Salvation is not to be loving or accepting but it is the most hateful thing we can ever do.

I would also like to say right at the outset of this talk that our title is derived from the question that the Pharisees came to Jesus with when seeking to test Him, as we get in verse 3 of chapter 19. However, before the Lord addresses their question, He takes the opportunity to make clear to them what marriage is, before He talks about what divorce does; and His teaching is therefore a good guide for us to think more about the positive meaning of marriage than divorce.

It is also worth noticing that while the whole of chapter 19 is not our main topic for today, it contains four very clearly linked topics which are not merely a coincidence. We start with marriage; then in verses 13-15 we learn about children; verses 16-26 tell us a lot about possessions; and then finally from verse 27 to the end of chapter 19 the Lord talks about the world to come. It is very much the case that for most of us, our whole lives are taken up with marriage, children, possessions, and the future. How much we can learn about these things in the Word of God! The Lord in this chapter shows us what His thoughts are for these important things.

Marriage

So, as we begin Chapter 19 verses 1 & 2, we read that Jesus was continuing His teaching and healing ministry. He moved from one region to another, and the crowds continued to follow Him. He was making a huge impact on these people, just think about those He healed and whose lives He changed. Men, women, and children were flocking after Him and you would think that the leaders of Judaism would have been pleased that their own people were being blessed, but no! They were only ever interested in thinking up legal questions in attempts to trip Him up and make them look good in the eyes of the people. Still today there are those who would rather question the

claims of Christ and Christianity rather than accepting the blessing that could come through the Gospel to them. Now I do not mean those who have genuine questions that need to be heard and answered from Scripture but those who are just intentionally putting off the fact that they have a decision to make based on Christ's claims on their lives and their own lost condition before a Holy God. If someone is listening today who can relate to this issue, please do not let your relentless desire for debate and confrontation rob you of the blessing of Salvation that God desires for you. From a personal point of view, I never enter into dialogue, far less heated debate, over something I have no interest in, do not believe in, or think is irrelevant to my life.

As mentioned earlier, we will come back to the Pharisees' question later, but I want to start with the Lord's answer. As He often did, He starts His answer at the beginning of time! He was able to do that because He was there at the beginning. Jesus was the creator God manifest in the flesh; God incarnate as the first chapter of John's Gospel so clearly tells us. He was before all things, He made all things, and for His glory all things were created. Ephesians chapter 3 verse 9 states, "God who created all things through Jesus Christ." It is worth noting at this point that when the Apostle Paul warns the Christians at Corinth in his second epistle to them, chapter 11 verse 4 about "another Jesus" he is referring to these very facts which are still under attack today. Many false religions and cults will accept Jesus as a great example or even a great prophet. They may revere Him and even claim to believe in Him, but unless He is accepted as God the Son and His work on Calvary's cross recognised as the only way of Salvation, then "another Jesus" and "another Gospel" are being preached and we must distance ourselves from these and stand against them. So, Jesus is able to go back to the beginning of creation and to take the Pharisees back to their own sacred writings of Moses, back to Genesis. We often call Genesis "The seed-plot of the Scriptures" and we do well to know it and understand it as it can open up all the truth of Scripture to us. There is a wonderful organisation called "Answers in Genesis" that I would recommend because, as the name "Answers in Genesis" suggests, it seeks to help us do exactly this.

So, let's do this and read from Genesis chapter 2 verses 21 to 24. Jesus referred to this passage and quoted v.24 in verse 5 of Matthew chapter 19.

"And the LORD GOD caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD GOD had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

Many people think this is a ridiculous account to believe in. If they are those who claim not to believe in God and His hand in creation, then I can see why they would say such a thing. But those of us who claim to be Christians have a responsibility to hold to this most beautiful and important teaching of God's word because it is at the heart of everything. As we are seeing today, the fact the Lord referred directly to it, and it is used as a picture in the New Testament of Christ and His Church, should tell us of its importance.

I believe that the refusal to live by this basic principle of social life is the root cause of most of the problems that face our world today and have blighted so much its history. Those Pharisees who tried to trip up the Lord knew very well the problems caused in their own Jewish History by those who failed to follow this command. Let's just look at a few notable examples. Abraham, that great man of faith, was promised a son by God even though he and his wife Sarah were well beyond childbearing age. In a moment of disobedience and lack of faith he took Sarah's handmaid,

Hagar, with whom he had a son, Ishmael, and this has caused so many problems ever since. However, God remained faithful to Abraham and Isaac was born to Sarah some years later. Then we have Jacob, although tricked initially by his father-in-law and given Leah as his wife when he wanted Rachel. He then went on to have children with other wives which resulted in hatred among his sons and ultimately Joseph being sold into slavery. His brothers informed their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild animal. That caused Jacob great upset, that affected him for the rest of his life.

Then finally King David, who had everything he could have wanted yet in a moment of weakness he lusted after Bathsheba, another man's wife. In order to cover up this sin he arranged for her husband to be killed in battle and took her as his wife and then the child she bore to him died. Although King David repented of this sin, it ruined his life and impacted his family for generations to come as God said that the sword would never depart from his house.

It is clear then that the Pharisees should have known this and been happy to live by it but, as is often the case, man had his own ideas and had already started to corrupt and change what God's intention had been from the beginning. Jewish history tells us that there were two Rabbis who were near contemporaries of Christ who taught very different views on marriage and divorce. It is fair to assume then that in verse 7 of Matthew chapter 19 the Pharisee's response to the Lord's very clear explanation of marriage was driven by the contradictory teachings of those Rabbis in respect of divorce as laid out by Moses in the law. Those who followed the teachings of Rabbi Shammai followed the law rigidly and only allowed a man to divorce his wife if she was guilty of sexual immorality. But those who followed Rabbi Hillel took a less rigid view and allowed a man to divorce his wife indiscriminately. How could both be in keeping with God's law as delivered to Moses? Indeed how can either be correct in light of Malachi chapter 2 verse 16 which tells us; "For the LORD GOD of Israel says that He hates divorce."

It is important to notice in verse 7 when the Pharisees ask about the certificate of divorce that Moses was permitted to give, they use the word "command." As was often the case with the Pharisees when they questioned Jesus and is similarly often done when people today question the Bible, words are added to skew the question. In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1-4, Moses gave the Israelites a way out of a marriage breakdown for reasons that are very specific but not readily understood in our culture; "found some uncleanness in her." This "uncleanness" is not adultery as this would have resulted in death under the law as explained in Deuteronomy chapter 22 verse 22. There is, however, no explicit command as far as I can see that this "uncleanness" could be overlooked for the marriage to continue. In our society nowadays adultery is not punishable by death and therefore forgiveness can be shown so that the marriage can continue.

So in the Lord's answer to the Pharisees in verse 9, He uses two different words translated as sexual immorality and adultery respectively. The justified reason for divorce and remarriage therefore cannot be adultery as the same word would be used twice. However, as I have just mentioned, even in the case of adultery, there can often be forgiveness and the marriage continues and there would be no sense that the marriage bond has been broken or another marriage ceremony is required. We must keep in mind that in verse 6 the Lord says, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." A marriage ceremony is an important and solemn occasion when we witness a man and a woman taking vows and then being joined together by God. The couple should always state in that ceremony that it is "until death parts us." This is the only way that marriage can be broken, and it is only God that can determine when this takes place.

In Deuteronomy it was because of sin, called the hardness of men's hearts by the Lord in Matthew 19:8, that this amendment to the law was allowed in certain circumstances. But as we have seen it was never God's intention and we as Christians are held to a far higher standard than what the Law allows. The Lord explains this in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel chapter 5, the

rules of His kingdom. He explains that we do commit murder or adultery in our hearts by simply having the wrong thoughts. This higher standard is also seen in marriage being a type of Christ and His Church. The apostle Paul writing in Ephesians chapter 5 quotes the verse we looked at earlier from Genesis chapter 2 and gives very straightforward, practical, and very challenging instructions to husbands and wives in order for this type to be maintained. How thankful we are then to realise that this bond between Christ and His church can never be broken, and this should be seen in our own marriages.

We must always however be very gracious in how marriage issues are handled. We live in a day when so many marriages end in divorce then remarriage takes place and I do not want anyone listening to this talk today to feel they are now in a hopeless position as far as God is concerned because of their marital status. Christ came to heal the broken-hearted and that is still His business today. We are all sinners and must daily come before the throne of grace in humility and faith to find peace in all our circumstances of life.

When we come to verse 10, we see that the disciples are somewhat concerned with the high standard of marriage that is set by the Lord and come to Him privately to ask whether it is therefore better not to marry at all. He explains to them using the example of the three types of eunuchs that being unmarried is not for everyone but if someone feels able to accept a celibate lifestyle then that is for them to decide. These words must have been very powerful to these relatively young disciples in respect of the seriousness of choosing a wife. The words often used in a marriage ceremony that, 'this should not be entered into lightly', are very true.

Children

In verses 13 to 15 we get this wonderful little story of the children being brought to the Lord and of the disciples trying to turn them away. I can really understand the disciples' thinking. Many things were really happening, it was busy, and I am sure they would be thinking that there were not enough hours in the day. Surely the Lord Jesus was far too busy to be distracted by children who would perhaps never remember the interaction anyway far less be blessed by it! Indeed, in Luke's account of this story he refers to them as infants, not even at an age when they could exercise personal faith and immediately be used in His work. However, Jesus uses this occasion to say: "For of such is the kingdom of heaven." The Lord requires from us childlike faith, not childish faith. Think about how a young child has complete trust in their parents, looks for them when anything distressing happens and is only ever at rest in their arms. It is this kind of relationship that the Lord wants to bring us into with our Heavenly Father.

The issue of the upset caused to children when divorce takes place is something that should not be missed from the order of events in this chapter. There is no doubt in my mind that if Christ's desire for our marriages was uppermost in our minds, followed by the needs and desires of our children, then the divorce lawyers would soon be out of business. It is indeed a sad reflection of our society that a quick trawl of our search engines brings up a whole raft of quick and cheap divorce options. There can be nothing more obnoxious to a Holy God than a quick and cheap solution to something so sacred.

Possessions

Then our chapter moves on to address the question of earthly possessions. A rich young man comes to Jesus, and he has what seems a very genuine question. He is concerned and interested in eternal life and wants to ask the Lord how to receive it. While his intentions may have been good, his presupposition was not. Notice the words in verse 16, "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life." It is ingrained into us from as early as any child can understand that if we do something good, we will be rewarded; and if we do something bad, we will be punished. On a human level this is sound logic, after all we sow what we reap. However, on a spiritual level it is a logic that is fundamentally flawed and will leave us hopeless and lost in God's eyes.

In verse 17 we first see that this young man also had a true sense of who Jesus was. He had addressed Him as “Good Teacher” and Jesus graciously points out there is none good, but God; and the young man seems to be perfectly happy with this assertion. As mentioned earlier, a true appreciation of who Jesus Christ was, is, and ever will be, is the foundation stone of eternal salvation and blessing. Jesus replies with the Ten Commandments but interestingly at the second five which refer to our dealings with each other, the first five are in respect of our dealings with God and are therefore harder to maintain. Verses 18 and 19 list the second five and the young man confidently asserts he has kept these from his youth. So he had maintained good standards in his life and that is very commendable. He is then able to go on and ask Jesus, “What do I still lack?” But however good and commendable these standards may be in our eyes, Jesus can see into his heart and knows that there is something there that needs to be brought out. So, before asking about the first five commandments relating to God, He asks the young man to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. This was a step too far as verse 22 tells us that he had great possessions and so would rather go away sorrowful than follow the Saviour. We must appreciate that this same instruction was not given to everyone who followed the Lord. For example, while the disciples left their jobs and businesses there is no recorded instruction for them to sell everything. It was simply that for this young man he wanted to do things his way and his great possessions were an important part of that for him, so Jesus brought that to his attention.

Again then, thinking about divorce, what an impact it has on the earthly possessions that can be so easily ruined instead of being so well used in a Christian marriage where husband and wife as “one flesh” are using their combined resources for the benefit of their family, fellowships, and wider community. How often it appears to me that the division of earthly possessions following divorce brings acrimony to the most otherwise mutually agreeable situations.

World to come

Chapter 19 then finishes with the Lord addressing another important question from His disciples which they raise following His teaching about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. To Jews, earthly riches were deemed to be a sign of God’s favour as they enabled someone to give more alms, but now Jesus was bringing in a new order of things. Just as it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, so it is impossible for men to inherit eternal life based on their own merits, as we have already seen with the rich young ruler. The Lord’s statement that with God all things are possible makes it very clear that salvation is down to His grace and not man’s merit. How very thankful we should all be of this! Then in verses 27-30 Peter raises a question about how they will be rewarded for following Jesus and the answer given is that this reward for faithfulness will be in a coming day when Christ rules this world. Our reward will not be the type that will corrupt and fade away as does the earthly possessions referred to earlier. This is not the remit of this talk, but it is further explained in the parable in chapter 20.

I trust these remarks were helpful and also challenging about what is a very difficult subject. The enemy is out to destroy those things that are precious to God with marriage and the family unit right at the very top of his hitlist. We pray that our marriages might be sustained, thrive, and be a tremendous picture of Christ and His church for which He died.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on the Matthew chapter 19, Divorce and its implications, talk number T1321 and I trust the message has been a real encouragement and a challenge to us all.

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