

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part IX)

19:1-12, Marriage, divorce, and celibacy

Pharisees came up to him and tested him: There's certainly nothing new about this; we've seen it over and over again already in Matthew. Their questions, of course, are not genuine; they hope to catch Jesus in a trap.

Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?: Divorce has always been a controversial topic, and in Jesus' day there were two main schools of thought, one of the school of Rabbi Shammai, which was strict (and unpopular!), one of the school of Rabbi Hillel, which was more lax and hence more popular with many Jews.

Marriage was viewed as a sacred duty. If a man was unmarried after the age of 20 – except to concentrate on the study of the law – he was guilty of breaking God's command to "be fruitful and multiply." Effectively, by not having children a man was killing his own descendants, and disrespected the glory of God!

However, despite this high ideal of marriage, it's also true that Jews of that day had a low view of women. F. F. Bruce:

"The Jews had very low views of women...A wife was bought, regarded as property, used as a household drudge, and dismissed at pleasure."

A diminished view of women means that "sacred duty" of marriage was also diminished, and God's word regarding it was compromised to the point of being disregarded. Tragically, those compromises were eventually elevated to the level of rabbinical "law". Per Rabbi Hillel, according to commentator William Barclay:

"...a man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner, if she spun, or went with unbound hair, or spoke to men in the streets, if she spoke disrespectfully of his parents in his presence, or if she was a brawling woman whose voice could be heard in the next house. Rabbi Akiba

even went the length of saying...that a man could divorce his wife if he found a woman whom he liked better and considered more beautiful.”

It's possible the Pharisees were hoping Jesus would comment on the contemporary situation where Herod was having an affair with Herodias, the very scandal that cost John the Baptist his life.

“For any cause” is the heart of the debate. Each school of thought understood that the Mosaic law gave permission for divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1: When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes *because he has found some uncleanness in her*, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house. Each side knew and believed Deuteronomy 24:1; the question was, “What constitutes uncleanness?”

Rabbi Shammai taught that “uncleanness” meant sexual immorality, and said this was the only valid reason for divorce. Rabbi Hillel taught that uncleanness to mean any sort of indiscretion; even to the point where for some rabbis, burning a husband’s breakfast was considered valid grounds for divorce!

Commentator Barclay says that the Rabbis had many sayings about bad marriages and the bad wife. They said that the man with a bad wife would never face hell, because he has paid for his sins on earth. They said that the man who is ruled by his wife has a life that is not life. They said that a bad wife is like leprosy to her husband, and the only way he could be cured is by divorce. They even said, “If a man has a bad wife, it is a religious duty to divorce her.”

So the Pharisees are trying to get Jesus to come down definitively on one side or the other. If He agreed with Hillel, they could proclaim that Jesus did not take the Law of Moses seriously. If He agreed with Shammai, they could claim that Jesus had no compassion for people in tough circumstances.

Have you not read...: The Pharisees wanted to talk about rabbinical opinions regarding divorce, but Jesus forces them back to the Scriptures to talk about *marriage*. His focus on the Scriptures, on marriage, and on God’s intentions for man, rather than divorce, answers not from Shammai or Hillel, but from Moses, spoiling their plan. Jesus asserts marriage as God’s institution, not man’s.

Be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh: This takes the matter back to creation, and Adam’s statement in Genesis 2:23, where we see that men and women (as husband and wife) are different; yet they are joined together as one, *completing* one another as *one flesh*.

(As an aside, this principle also prohibits polygamy. Though polygamy was allowed in the Old Testament, it was never God’s best intention for His people – and men should have known so from looking at Genesis 2:24.)

Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?: The Pharisees incorrectly thought that God *commanded* divorce where there was uncleanness. But Jesus noted the difference between “command” and “permitted.” God *never* commands divorce, but He does permit it. Moses was not creating or promoting divorce; he was controlling it.

Because of your hardness of heart: Divorce is never commanded, but permitted by God in certain circumstances, and God permits it because of the hardness of human hearts. Sometimes the heart of the either the offending or offended party (or both) is hard, and they will not do what must be done to reconcile the relationship.

Except for sexual immorality: Jesus here interprets the meaning of the word “uncleanness” in the Mosaic Law, showing that it refers to sexual immorality, not just anything that might displease the husband. Therefore, divorce – and the freedom to remarry without sin – is only permitted in the case of sexual immorality.

The Greek word for sexual immorality is broad in meaning, covering a wide span of sexual impropriety that may or may not include adultery.

This is a hard teaching from Jesus! There are many reasons people give today to justify divorce that do not fulfill the two Biblical allowances for divorce. Marriage, as a promise made to God, to our spouse and to the world, is a binding promise, and cannot be broken at our own discretion. If God does not recognize the promise being broken, then it is not.

There are also many situations where a marriage is separated or divorced for reasons that do not fulfill the Biblical allowance for divorce, but later one or

more of the spouses goes on to give Biblical “allowance”, whether by marriage or sexual relations with another.

Note that the Apostle Paul added the case of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse in 1 Corinthians 7:15 as a valid reason for divorce, which is a valid blending of reasons related to hardness of heart, and one which was more prevalent in the Gentile cultures he found himself in.

Paul also wrote just 2 verses later: “As the Lord has called each one, so let him walk.” In context, Paul is telling us not to try to undo the past in regard to relationships; God tells us to repent of whatever sin is there and then to move on. If you are married to your second wife after wrongfully divorcing your first wife, and become a Christian, don’t think you must now leave your second wife and go back to your first wife, trying to undo the past. As the Lord has called you, walk in that place right now.

Of course this is a very sensitive topic still today. While incompatibility, not loving each other anymore, misery, and even *abuse* are not strictly biblical grounds for divorce, they certainly may be grounds for separation and consequent “celibacy within marriage” as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 7:11. A Christian couple may in fact split up for reasons that do not justify a Biblical divorce. It may be because of a misguided sense of spirituality; it may be because of general unhappiness, or conflict, or abuse, or misery, addiction, poverty, or.... Paul recognizes (without at all encouraging) that one might depart in such circumstance, but they cannot consider themselves divorced, with the right to remarry, because their marriage had not split up for reasons that justify a Biblical divorce.

If you find yourself in such circumstances, please consult your pastor and/or a Christian relationship counselor!

If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry: The disciples understood Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce clearly. It is not a commitment to be entered into quickly or lightly, and since marriage is so binding before God, then maybe it is better not to marry at all. (Note that it was too late for at least some of the disciples, like Peter!)

Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given: Jesus teaches that celibacy is good for some, for the one who is able to accept it, such as Jesus Himself (and the Apostle Paul, per 1 Corinthians 7:7-

9). Of course, Paul is also the apostle who wrote “It is better to marry than to burn”, so even he recognized that the celibate life isn’t for everyone!

The term “eunuch” was used figuratively for those who voluntarily abstain from marriage. Jesus here talks of three kinds of eunuchs, but demands entry into such a life of no one.

Those who are “called” to celibacy are addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, where it says they should be holy both in body and in spirit. These “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” should come to peace with their celibacy both physically and spiritually; it should not be a consistent torment to them in either aspect.

9:13-15, Jesus blesses little children

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray: It is *pure coincidence* that in the midst of Jesus’ teaching on marriage, parents brought their children to be blessed. Oh, wait, never mind, I don’t believe that at all. 😊

Matthew uses the word παιδία (“pai-DEE-uh”) which means “little children”, and Luke uses the word βρέφη (“brEF-ay”), which means “infants”.

The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...”: This teaches us something remarkable. We quote this verse in our Liturgy of Baptism because it teaches us about God’s desire to save us. Think of others we’ve seen Jesus heal and save; some came to Him under their own power. Others had to be brought to him by friends or family. Some were interceded for without even being brought physically into His presence. His desire to save is not dependent on the power, will, faculties, capability, or even confession of faith of the one He saves, heals, or delivers.

19:16-30, The Rich Young Man

What good deed must I do to have eternal life?: This question tells us that this man, like most all people by nature, felt he must do something to earn eternal life. So he wanted to know what good work, noble deed, spiritual practice, or perhaps special sacrifice he could do to achieve that eternal life.

The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell us this man was rich. Matthew adds the detail that he was young, and Luke tells us he was a ruler.

Why do you ask me about what is good?: Some translations render this as “Why do you call Me good?”, which is not very accurate. The NASB, ESV, and some others render it better. This has nothing to do with the “goodness” of Jesus. Rather, Jesus is saying, “You have the scriptures; you should already know about everything you need to do that is good!”

Keep the commandments: Hence Jesus’ answer to the question is straightforward. If you want to gain eternal life *by your doing*, you must keep the commandments – all of them, and keep them in the fullest sense, perfectly!

Which ones?... You shall not murder....: Interestingly, Jesus asked the man about the commandments which deal with a man’s relation to man. In response, the young man, thinking he was in pretty good shape, answers, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

But to keep the whole law it isn’t enough to do good by our fellow man and be just good ole’ decent folk; to do right by God, and give Him the glory and honor He deserves, we must keep both “tablets” of God’s law, which requires complete compliance without failure.

Mark 10:21 tells us that in response to the man’s answer, *Jesus loved him*. Jesus had compassion on this man, who was so misguided as to think that he really could justify himself before God.

What do I still lack?: This alone tells us that this young man had not in fact perfectly kept the law, and he knew it. There was still something lacking in his life, reflecting something missing in his relationship with God.

If you would be **perfect**, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, **follow me**: The call to forsake everything and follow Jesus is a call to put God first in all things. It is full obedience to the *first* table of the law, which deals with man’s relation to God.

This is not a general commandment to everyone; Jesus was dealing with the need of this man's heart. But we should examine ourselves to discern whether this might apply to us. Just as the sermon on the mount challenges us to be honest with ourselves about the pervasiveness and depth of our defectiveness before the perfect holiness of God and drives us into the arms of His Son crying for mercy, so too stories like this are preserved in the gospels precisely because they sometimes are needed to jar us out of our comfort zone and into recognition of our deadly self-reliance.

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions: One might hope for a happier ending here, but instead we are given a cautionary tale. This rich young man ultimately still trusted in his wealth first and foremost. Perhaps there is hope in that he was sorrowful at the end of this encounter; we are not told of his ultimate fate. Had the nagging feeling that brought him to Jesus in the first place continued? Had the Holy Spirit continued to chip away at the idol that was blocking him from becoming a disciple of Christ? We don't know, but we can and should learn from this encounter.

Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven: Wealth and riches are a problem perhaps because they tend to make us satisfied with this life, instead of longing for the age to come. Or perhaps because we tend to give ourselves for that wealth instead of understanding it as being a trust from God in the first place. And sometimes our ambition to gain riches blinds us to seeking or deepening our relationship with God.

The illustration that Jesus uses, that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, was meant to be somewhat humorous, easy to remember, and easy to understand. It's something that's just flat impossible.

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?": This astonishment makes sense; wealth in their world was usually thought of as a sign of God's blessing and favor! They may have even hoped that their following of Jesus would one day make them wealthy and influential, as prominent leaders in His Messianic government.

With God all things are possible: It is possible for the rich young man to be saved. God's grace is enough to save the rich man; we have the examples of people like Zaccheus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Barnabas, all wealthy men

who were used by God and called to be part of His kingdom. There are many other examples throughout the Bible, of course.

(God's dirty little secret is that is every bit as hard for a POOR person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!)

See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? In contrast to the rich young ruler, the disciples *did* leave all behind to follow Jesus. So, Peter wonders, what would be *their* reward? Jesus tells of special honor for the disciples: you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. But there will be *universal honor for all* who sacrifice for Jesus' sake; whatever has been given up for Him will be returned to us a hundred times over – in addition to everlasting life. This is clear not meant in any kind of material sense, but the “hundredfold” certainly is literally true in the spiritual sense.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first: In the previous words, Jesus promised that those who sacrificed for His sake and the sake of His kingdom would be rewarded. Then He said that though they would be rewarded, it would be different than man usually expects; because we usually believe that the *first* will be first and the *last* will be last.

(The Parable of the Vineyard in chapter 20 will illustrate this principle!)