

Our Lord's Comments on Divorce and Celibacy

Matthew 19:1-12

Matthew 19:1-11 - *"When Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. ² And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.*

³ The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" ⁴ And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" ⁸ He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

¹⁰ His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: ¹² For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

Background Notes

Matthew 19:1 marks the ending of our Lord's ministry in the Galilee area. His great Galilean ministry spanned about two and a half years of our Lord's public ministry. At this point, the Lord left Galilee and moved south: *"He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan."* The Lord was on His way to Jerusalem and the events that awaited Him there during the last week of His earthly life.

At some point in His journey, the Lord crossed over the Jordan River into an area known at that time as Perea, east of the Jordan River. Rather than travel through Samaria when going between Galilee and Judea, the Jewish people would cross over the Jordan River and travel through Perea. You will remember that the Jews considered Samaritans a lower, mixed race and avoided contact with them. This kind of thinking was not true of our Lord, however. We know He had no qualms about traveling through Samaria, because He ministered to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well at Shechem, in Samaria (John 4). On this trip, however, the Lord crossed over the Jordan to minister to the needs of the folks of Perea.

In verse 2 we read that great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. Think of all the healing miracles of our Lord that are not specifically described in the Gospels, but are mentioned in brief phrases, such as what we have here in verse 2: "...healed them there." It's going to be great when we get to heaven and look back to see the details of all these miracles!

Doctrinal Points

1. The institution of marriage was the basis for the Lord's position on divorce.

While our Lord was in Perea, a group of Pharisees tested Him with a question about divorce. At that time, divorce was part of the culture in Israel, just as it is in our country today. There were two schools of thought about divorce in Israel. The "strict view" held that a divorce could only be justified because of sexual immorality. The more "lenient view" held that a divorce could be obtained for just about any reason.

The Pharisees thought that they could discredit the Lord with their question about divorce, because no matter which way the Lord answered, some portion of His followers would be antagonized. Thus His followers would be split - or so the Pharisees thought! But the Lord didn't answer "yes" or "no" when the Pharisees asked, *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?"*

Instead of answering "yes" or "no" the Lord went back to the Creation account, and spoke about the time when God instituted marriage - **"in the beginning."** He quoted Genesis 2:24, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."* Then the Lord added, in Matthew 19:5-6, *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."*

"One wife for life" was God's plan for mankind from the beginning. So the Pharisees asked, *"Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"* They were referring to the passage on divorce in the Mosaic Law, in Deuteronomy 24. Once again, the Lord went back to Creation, and He said, *"because of the hardness of your hearts, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (v8).* "...but **from the beginning** it was not so." Thus **God's institution of marriage in the beginning was the basis for our Lord's position on divorce, and that should be the basis of our position on divorce as well.**

What about the so-called "exception clause" in verse 9? *"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."* As you may know, there are several interpretations of this verse.

One opinion holds that there are **no** grounds for a biblical divorce today, because the Lord was speaking before the Mosaic Law ended. In this view, during the Church Age there are **no** grounds for divorce, because this exception clause was valid only for people who were living under the Mosaic Law, during the time of the Mosaic Law. Have you heard that position?

I differ from that position. My position is that sexual immorality is a basis for divorce, just as the Lord stated here. However, God is much more pleased with forgiveness and reconciliation, rather than divorce - even when there has been unfaithfulness in a marriage. Why? Because divorce shatters the picture that God intends to convey through marriage: the picture of the love relationship between Jesus Christ and His bride, the Church. God doesn't divorce us, even when we are unfaithful to Him!

Listen to the teaching on the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:31-32, *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." Reconciliation is always more pleasing to the Lord than divorce. However, sexual unfaithfulness in marriage is the **only** biblical basis for considering divorce.

At this point the question is always raised: what about re-marriage after divorce? My personal position is that if there is a biblical reason for divorce, there is a biblical basis for re-marriage. Otherwise, divorce would serve no purpose that couldn't be achieved by separation. There are many difficult situations in connection with divorce and re-marriage. Church leaders and other godly believers are called on to counsel or discipline and make decisions in many very involved and complicated situations, but I believe we should always start where the Lord started: the institution of marriage **by God in the beginning** was the basis for our Lord's position on divorce.

2. The advance of the kingdom was the basis for the Lord's position on celibacy.

"His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it" (v10-13).

The disciples thought it might be better not to marry at all, rather than submit to the restriction of "one wife for life"! It seems that they had been influenced by the more lenient view of divorce of that day, just as many people today are. The Lord's answer must have been somewhat shocking to them. In essence, the Lord said, "Yes, there is a place for choosing not to marry, but it's not for everyone, and it's not for those who can't handle it. However, a person can be celibate for the glory of God."

He said that some men are eunuchs because they were born that way, and then He said some men are eunuchs because they were made eunuchs by men. For example, in ancient days the men who were the keepers of a king's harem were "made eunuchs" (castrated), for obvious reasons. In addition, said the Lord, some people have "*made themselves eunuchs*" for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Was the Lord advising mutilation of the body for the sake of the kingdom? Certainly not! He meant they have chosen not to marry. They have voluntarily given up the joys of marriage for the sake of the kingdom. Some are given the gift of celibacy but this is not the norm.

The apostle Paul gave up marriage for the sake of the gospel, and he discussed the subject in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul wrote, "*For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that*" (1 Corinthians 7:7). If you're not married, you don't have the responsibility of maintaining a home and family. You can give more of your time to advance the kingdom of God. If you're married, you have responsibilities to fulfill as a spouse and parent – and this is the normal and good pattern of life for most people. You must make these decisions before God. 1 Corinthians 7 expands on what our Lord taught here in Matthew 19.

The advance of the kingdom was the basis for the Lord's position on celibacy.

Practical Application

Don't think God approves of everything He allows!

Under the Old Testament Law, God allowed divorce (v8). As a result, many of the Jews thought that God **approved** of divorce! Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact, in Malachi 2:16 God said, "**I hate divorce.**" And God has not changed His mind.

Many people today think if **God allows** something, that must mean **He approves** of it. Some Christians think that way, too. For example, some wealthy Christians jump to the conclusion that God approves of their lavish lifestyle - but that's not necessarily so! The lifestyle of some well-off believers may be way off the mark, by biblical standards. Good health or wealth is not the stamp of God's approval on anyone's lifestyle - it's simply what God, in His grace, has **allowed** in their lives.

Don't fall into that trap! Don't think that God **approves** of everything He **allows**!