MATTHEW

Chapter 19

*Divorce*

**When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.  2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” 4 “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’  5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?  6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” 7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” 8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.  9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” 10 The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.  12 For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”**

**19:1** FINISHED SAYING THESE THINGS – Matthew employs the same transitional formula here at the end of the fourth discourse (18:1-35) as he did at the end of the three preceding discourses (7:28; 11:1; 13:53). He will utilize it more time: at the end of the great Eschatological Discourse (26:1) (CC)

*the other side of the Jordan.* The east side, known later as Transjordan or Perea and today simply as Jordan. Jesus now began ministering there (see note on Lk 13:22). (CSB)

It is not altogether clear what the phrase, literally, “the boundaries of Judea across the Jordan” refers to. What is plain is that Jesus has now made His way to the south toward Jerusalem, where He will suffer, die, and be raised. (CC)

**19:3** TO TEST HIM – The present stem participle peirazontes, “tempting,” likely expresses the purpose for which the Pharisees approach Jesus: “in order to tempt.” They do not want to learn whether he is reliable or trustworthy; instead, they are trying to trap Jesus in some way. (CC)

*for any and every reason.* This last part of the question is not in the parallel passage in Mark (10:2). Matthew possibly included it because he was writing to the Jews, who were aware of the dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel over the interpretation of Dt 24:1–4. Shammai held that “something indecent” meant “marital unfaithfulness”—the only allowable cause for divorce. Hillel (c. 60 b.c.–a.d. 20) emphasized the preceding clause, “who becomes displeasing to him.” He would allow a man to divorce his wife if she did anything he disliked—even if she burned his food while cooking it. Jesus clearly took the side of Shammai (see v. 9), but only after first pointing back to God’s original ideal for marriage in Ge 1:27; 2:24. (CSB)

**19:4**  HAVEN’T YOU READ – As He does so often (cf. 12:1-14; 15:1-20), Jesus alters the terms of the debate. He asks a rhetorical question that, in effect, accuses the Pharisees of being unable to read their own Scriptures rightly or, more specifically, to know which particular Scripture passage they should be reading when it comes to the issue of God’s plan for and Law regarding marriage. Jesus redirects the focus back to Gen 1:27 and 2:24. (CC)

**19:6** LET MAN NOT SEPARATE – Since the Law of God expresses His will for His human creatures, it is never lawful for a man to divorce His wife, not for any cause. To do so is to tear apart what God has joined, and no man should do that. (CC)

**19:8** JESUS REPLIED – Christ’s answer is significant for at least three reasons. In the first place, He once again denies them the ability to set the terms of the debate; He actually refuses to let the language of His opponents stand. The people to whom Moses was (and is) speaking are deeply flawed people who all too often harden their hearts against God and His holy ways. Deut 24:1-4 is not a command to divorce nor a regulation stipulating how to do it. (CC)

Second, Jesus reveals what could be described as the root cause of all the divorces that do take place in this fallen world. That fact must never be allowed ti hide or obscure the reality that a divorce only happens because of human sin, because a human heart becomes hardened against God and against one’s own husband or wife. (CC)

The third reason why Christ’ answer in 19:7-9 is significant is this: it’s the same answer that He gave already in 19:4-6. Jesus resolutely refuses to allow His opponents to control the terms of the debate; He continues not to enter into a discussion of “the biblical grounds for divorce.” The phrase “from the beginning” directs the Pharisees (and Matthew’s hearer/readers) back to the Genesis passages that Christ has already cited and to the conclusion that Christ has already drawn from the scriptural institution of marriage. (CC)

The impact, however, must have been immense. Jesus labels as the grossest kind of immorality what had become standard and customary behavior. What many in Israel have been thinking is this: divorce happens in society and among the people called to be God’s, and husbands are surely justified (at least at times) in divorcing their wives, so what is needed is to define when divorce is lawful and when it is not. (CC)

Jesus is not saying, “It’s okay with God if you get a divorce when there has been sexual unfaithfulness.” Such a divorce and remarriage may not be adultery, but they could be cruelty and revenge, which also grieve the heart of the Father of Jesus. (CC)

**19:10** DISCIPLES SAID TO HIM – The disciples are shocked because they have been taught by the social environment around them that divorce, though perhaps a regrettable action, is certainly lawful in any number of situations. (CC)

**19:11** NOT EVERYONE CAN ACCEPT – The disciples are partly correct; for some it is better not to marry – but it is only better for those to whom this gift has been given. Not every believer is able to accept that the celibate life is better, as the disciples have just partly enunciated. The meaning of Jesus’ statement in 19:11 is congruent with His further clarification in 19:12 of who may benefit from celibacy and who has been given the gift. (CC)

**19:12** SOME ARE EUNUCHS – The very term “eunuch” was something of a pejorative term in Second Temple Judaism. Now, however, Jesus affirms that there are actually three kinds of eunuchs. First, it occasionally may happen that a make human creature is born without the ability to be a husband and father because of a defect in physiology. Second, all of the people in Jesus’ audience were aware of the practice of castration. Often this was carried out on a male (usually a slave) to render him “safe” in the company of an overlord’s wife or harem. (CC)

There is a third kind, however. God has given to some men (and by extension, we could also say some women) the ability to accept a different calling and to set aside the gift of marriage in order to devote themselves more fully to the purposes of God, who is at work in Jesus to reestablish His reign in Israel and in the world. There are those who “make themselves eunuchs on account of the reign of heaven” (19:12). Jesus’ words are not to be taken literally anymore than His words about plucking our one’s eye or cutting off one’s hand (18:8-9). The celibate life of laypersons is no less God-pleasing than that of those called to full-time service in the church. There is also a life of non-married discipleship that brings honor to God and blessing to those to whom it is given. (CC)

As with many truths, there is a balance that is needed. One wonders how many marriages would never take place if the two parties were encouraged to grow and mature as Christians and human beings for a few years before their union. One wonders as well how many single Christians have been insulted and excluded by well-meaning (or perhaps not so-so-well-meaning) comments that assume that because that because they are not married, there must be something wrong with them or something incomplete about them. Jesus’ words mandate that holy matrimony is to endure “so long as you both shall live” at the same time that they declare celibacy too to be a holy estate, a God-pleasing vocation for the sake of the reign of God. (CC)

**19:10–12** See 1Co 7:7–8, 26, 32–35. (CSB)

*The Little Children and Jesus*

**13 Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. 14 Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”  15 When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.**

**19:13-15** The fourth great discourse of Jesus in Matthew on caring for the greatest (18:1-35), afforded the opportunity of describing the place and status of children in the ancient world generally and in Israel particularly. To summarize briefly, in the ancient world, little children were lowly in status and regarded as powerless, foolish, and (at times) unimportant. Jesus’ disciples show that they still share the common ancient view when they rebuke the unnamed people, presumably the fathers and/or mothers, who purpose to bring their children to Jesus for Him to put His hands on them and to pray for a blessing. (CC)

Christ turns them around and invites them to believe that it is precisely to people who are like these children – lowly, powerless, and without resources of their own – that He brings the reign of heaven already now. Such ones will also enter the reign of heaven on the Last Day (18:3). (CC)

*The Rich Young Man*

**16 Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” 17 “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” 18 “Which ones?” the man inquired. Jesus replied, ”‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony,  19 honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” 20 “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” 21 Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.  24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” 26 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” 27 Peter answered him, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” 28 Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.  29 And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.  30 But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.**

**19:16** TEACHER – A number of people in Matthew approach Jesus as supplicants, and Jesus hears their pleas and grants then what they ask, for example healing or exorcism. In every case in which such persons address Jesus, they either names Him as “Lord” (as disciples do) or else as both “Lord” and “Son of David.” Our wealthy young man does neither. What is more, his manner of speaking actually aligns with a darker theme in Matthew, that is the pattern of those who address Jesus as “Teacher.” Every time someone calls Jesus “Teacher,” that speaker is rebuffed, or even worse, they show themselves to be actively hostile toward Jesus. (CC)

*what good thing must I do … ?* The rich man was thinking in terms of righteousness by works. Jesus had to correct this misunderstanding first before answering the question more fully. (CSB)

*eternal life.* The first use of this term in Matthew’s Gospel (see v. 29; 25:46). In John it occurs much more frequently, often taking the place of the term “kingdom of God (or heaven)” used in the Synoptics, which treat the following three expressions as synonymous: (1) eternal life (v. 16; Mk 10:17; Lk 18:18), (2) entering the kingdom of heaven (v. 23; Mk 10:24; Lk 18:24) and (3) being saved (vv. 25–26; Mk 10:26–27; Lk 18:26–27). (CSB)

**19:17** *There is only One who is good.* The good is not something to be done as meritorious in itself. God alone is good, and all other goodness derives from him—even the keeping of the commandments, which Jesus proceeded to enumerate (vv. 18–20). (CSB)

*If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.*† “To enter life” is the same as “to get eternal life” (v. 16). The requirement to “obey the commandments” is not to establish one’s merit before God but is to be an expression of true faith. The Bible always teaches that salvation is a gift of God’s grace received through faith, which is also a gift of God (see Eph 2:8–9). (CSB)

The typical Jewish teacher or rabbi would be expected to quote the teaching of Moses, the mediator of the covenant between God and Israel. Apparently that is what the rich man expects of Jesus, and Jesus seems to meet that expectation by continuing with citations from the Torah of Moses. Only One greater than Moses could be expected to present authoritative new teaching that would fulfill and supplant that already given in the Torah – as Jesus di in, for example, 5:17-32. Jesus refrains from doing that here in round 1, but He will in round 2 (19:21) and in His further interaction with His disciples (19:23-26) (CC)

**19:21** *go, sell your possessions.* In his listing of the commandments, Jesus omitted “Do not covet.” This was the rich man’s main problem and was preventing him from entering life. (CSB)

**19:24** *camel to go through the eye of a needle.* See note on Mk 10:25. (CSB)

We should not regard Jesus’ demand that the young man sell all his possessions and give everything to the poor as a general requirement for discipleship. Even in the case of the disciples who immediately left their daily tasks behind when Jesus called them (4:18-22; 9:9), these men did not divest themselves of all their possessions. If greater riches have been entrusted to my keeping, such power is to be used for the blessing of others and not to enhance my own ego or status. (CC)

What is it, then, about wealth that makes it a potentially lethal spiritual poison? There are probably many Christian and biblical ways to answer that question, but two come to mind. In the first place, wealth can quickly become fuel poured on the fire of our appetites and lusts. (Rockefeller: “A little bit more.”) How wonderful will be the day when all things are renewed by God’s work in Christ, and we will once again be content! Until that day, desire all too quickly seeks gratification, but when it finds gratification, it does not rest. What once were unnecessary luxuries quickly become needs, and needs begin to control our time and energy and commitment. In the second place, wealth is dangerous because it brings a certain kind of power . Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. (CC)

**19:25** WHO THEN CAN BE SAVED – The disciples have assumed, and not entirely without reason, that wealth and piety are a positive combination, a sign of divine favor. One could think of such OT worthies as Abraham and Job. The farthest thing from their imagination is that wealth could actually be working to diminish true piety and to keep a person away from God. They regarded the wealthy you man, who claimed to have kept God’s commandments scrupulously, as a likely candidate for salvation. In some sense they must have generalized this in their own minds, thinking that others with similar traits would easily enter the eschatological reign. Jesus’ words have one again turned their world upside down. (CC)

**19:28** *judging.* Governing or ruling (cf. the OT “judge”; see Introduction to Judges: Title). (CSB)

Although the apostles are simply disciples of Jesus along with others, the Twelve do occupy a unique office that, stunningly, will show itself on the Day of Judgment. They will participate in some active way in the universal judgment that the Son of Man will carry out when He comes in His glory and gives to each person according to his work of either following Jesus or rejecting Him. (CC)

**19:29** WILL RECEIVE A HUNDRED TIMES – To be sure, the apostles have followed Jesus and His call, and their unique office will be exercised even on the Last Day. Nevertheless, many others have also become disciples, and they have suffered various kinds of loss as well, leaving behind their old relationships with possessions and family for the sake of all Jesus means and does – for the sake of His name. It doesn’t matter who the disciple is or how much he or she has lost. All disciples will, on the Last Day, be abundantly recompensed and blessed, and they will all receive eternal life. Ultimately, there will be no essential distinctions between believers at the consummation of the reign of God.