

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT19A)

Matthew 19:1-12

Jesus Responds to Pharisees Regarding Divorce (19:1-10)

Background – The Pharisees are often found in Matthew’s Gospel to be testing or opposing Jesus in some way (e.g. 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1; 16:1; 19:3; 22:15, 34-35). Their tests were not designed to satisfy questions from a mind receptive to the Truth. Their tests were designed to trap or ensnare. In this passage, they probably hoped that Jesus would say something to damage His reputation with the people by contradicting Moses or perhaps entangle Him in the Herod-Herodias affair and thereby suffer the same fate as John the Baptist. [Remember that Herod Antipas and Herodias eloped and married, even though both were already married. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great and Antipas was her uncle.]

Within Jewish religious circles there were roughly two opposing camps regarding the issue of divorce. Both the Rabbinic school of Hillel and Shammai permitted divorce of the woman by the man on the grounds of “something indecent” in Deuteronomy 24:1. However, they disagreed on what “indecent” might include.

- The school of Shammai interpreted “something indecent” to refer to any gross indecency to include adultery.
- The school of Hillel interpreted “something indecent” to refer to almost any kind of real or imagined offense, e.g. an improperly cooked meal or even becoming less attractive to the man.

The result of these positions of course led to very frequent divorces within the Pharisaic community to the point of divorce becoming a scandal. For instance, Josephus, a Pharisee who was himself a divorcee, viewed divorce to be permitted for any reason whatsoever.

No doubt, all of this is part of the background behind even the wording of the Pharisee’s question in verse 7 in which they used the word “command” in contrast to Jesus’ use of “permitted” in verse 8. They viewed divorce as some type of privilege instead of God’s means of last resort.

Jesus’ response in verses 4-6 & 8-9 – Jesus’ response in these verses reveals God’s desire in contrast to His permissive will due to the spiritual hardness of heart of the religious crowd. The following points should summarize this section of Scripture:

- God’s desire is that marriage last for the duration of the husband and wife’s lives.
- Divorce was not legitimately allowed by God from the time of Adam and Eve until the giving of the Law to Moses [note the phrase “but from the beginning it was not so” in verse 8].
- The “command” of Moses to which the Pharisees refer in verse 7 is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, specifically verse 1.
 - The debate in religious Judaism was over the meaning of “uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24:1. In other words, just what was permissible to be included in the definition of that word.
- In **verse 8**, Jesus is explaining the **Mosaic Law** that they **should** have been practicing. He is **not** explaining **Kingdom Truth** to be applied by the Messianic community of believing Israel during the Age of the Messianic Kingdom.
- **Verse 9** begins with the phrase “*And I say to you*” which indicates that Jesus is switching from explaining the Mosaic Law in verse 8 to **explaining Kingdom Truth** in verse 9. [The same pattern was used by Jesus in His teaching regarding Kingdom principles in the Beatitudes (see 5:27-28 and 31-32). In *Matthew 5:27-28 & 31-32*, Jesus is explaining

Kingdom Truth regarding marriage [note the use of the phrase “you have heard...but I say to you”].

- The word translated “sexual immorality” is the Greek word *porneia* and refers to any kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, e.g. prostitution, fornication or adultery.
 - It is distinct from the Greek word for adultery *moicheuein* which is a specific reference to sex outside of the marriage by a marriage partner.
 - However, *porneia* includes adultery even if not restricted to it.
- In other words, the Kingdom Truth that Jesus taught was a higher set of principles than how the Mosaic Law had been interpreted.
 - The religious leaders of Israel had selfishly interpreted “uncleanness” in Deuteronomy 24:1 included any selfish reason for divorcing a wife.
 - The Mosaic Law allowed a woman so divorced to remarry (Deut 24:2-3), but she was prohibited from remarrying her 1st divorcing husband.
 - Jesus did not attempt to define what constituted “uncleanness” per the Mosaic Law in Deuteronomy 24:1.
 - Jesus only indicated that what had been “permitted” in the Mosaic Law was due to the “hardness of heart” (v 8) of the Jews. [This was a consistent point of contrast between Jesus’ teaching regarding Kingdom Law and the distorted applications of the intent of the Mosaic Law by the Jews].
 - I believe that God’s reason for allowing a divorce in such cases relates to His purpose for Israel as a nation in that Age or Dispensation of human history.
 - Think of the implications upon Israel as a nation to be a light to the Gentiles if the marriages of Israel were in a shambles due to a non-spiritual life (hardness of heart) on the part of one or both spouses.
 - Think of the case where the husband was not a spiritual man and the wife was a spiritual woman and the husband desired to divorce the wife. What recourse did the wife have? None, but to accept the certificate of divorce and remarry.
 - God knew that in the second marriage (although not His desire for marriage) there would be at least an opportunity to preserve the happiness of the woman through a second marriage to a spiritual man, thus allowing that one marriage to contribute to the nation being a light unto the Gentiles.
- In both the Mosaic Law passage that serves as the background (Deut 24:1-4) and in Jesus’ teaching of Kingdom Truth (Matt 19:9), the divorce appears to occur after marriage and not just during the betrothal period as some contend (see Deut 24:1 – “sends her out of his house”).
 - Under the Mosaic Law, there was a procedure established for a husband who had no proof, but suspected his wife of infidelity (Num 5:11-31). However, this portion of the Mosaic Law has no direct relationship with Matthew 19.
 - The Mosaic Law included provisions for sexual unfaithfulness on the part of the bride during the betrothal period (Deut 22:13-30). However, in my opinion, Deuteronomy 22:13-30 has no direct relationship to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19.
- Finally, the Kingdom Truth that Jesus teaches establishes a norm of behavior that is far above either the Mosaic Law or the distortions of the Mosaic Law by the religious leaders of Israel in their selfish interpretation of “uncleanness.” Kingdom Law states that:
 - A husband is not to divorce his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness of any type.
 - If the husband divorces his wife for any other cause and marries another, he has committed adultery.

- If the wife guilty of sexual unfaithfulness who has been divorced marries another, she has committed adultery.
- This passage does not indicate whether the husband who legitimately divorces his wife in the Kingdom has the right to remarry; however, it may be implied.
- In this passage, Jesus does not mention capital punishment for adultery (Deut 22:22) or fornication during the betrothal period (Deut 22:21, 24) as does the Mosaic Law.
- Those aspects of Kingdom Truth that need further clarification will no doubt be the subject of the additional revelation to come during the Messianic Reign of Christ (e.g. Joel 2).
- Jesus' Kingdom teaching in **verse 9** would have been a direct indictment of the religious Jewish leaders who were not living lives that characterized a mindset receptive to the Kingdom.
- The mindset receptive to the Kingdom (e.g. Matt 5:3-12) that Jesus offered would not look for any selfish reason to divorce a wife.
- Just because the Kingdom Truth that Jesus taught permitted divorce (verse 9), it doesn't mean that Kingdom Truth required divorce in the case of sexual immorality.

Similarities and Differences With Church Age Truth – Perhaps the most relevant passage that provides guidance regarding divorce and remarriage in the Church Age is 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. In this passage, divorce is permitted under special circumstances. Paul's teaching includes two perspectives:

- God's sovereign desire is that a husband and wife are not to divorce in the Church Age. See 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. (Same as other dispensations).
- If a husband and wife get a divorce, then they have two options:
 - Be reconciled to each other (verse 11)
 - Remain unmarried (verse 11)
- If they were married as unbelievers and later one of them becomes a believer, then the believer is to remain with the unbelieving spouse as long as the unbelieving spouse is willing (see verses 12-14).
- If the unbelieving spouse departs the marriage, the believing spouse must allow him or her to depart (see verse 15).
- The believer should remain unmarried as long as the unbeliever doesn't remarry so as to allow for reconciliation (verse 11 cf. verse 16)
 - The passage does not indicate whether the believer can remarry someone else if the unbeliever marries someone else after the first divorce.
 - However, if the former husband dies, the implication is that the believing spouse could remarry (v. 39).
- God is most interested in peace in the home (verse 15).
- Other than the case of the unbeliever leaving the believer, there are no conditions specified to legitimize divorce in the Church Age.
 - However, in this Age of the Church, believers live by means of the Spirit; therefore, each believer will need to determine for himself/herself whether divorce should be pursued based upon the Spirit's ministry in the believer's life.
- If the believer does divorce, this passage indicates that he/she is to remain unmarried (verse 11).
 - The passage doesn't address many circumstances involving believers such as spousal abuse, a non-spiritual believer spouse leaving a spiritual spouse, etc.
 - The ability of the spiritual believer to tolerate the marriage will be related to the level of the spiritual believer's spiritual growth and guidance from the Holy Spirit.
 - The issue of adultery or sexual immorality (Matt 19:9) is not addressed as it was in Jesus' teaching regarding Kingdom Truth. This too will relate to the spiritual believer spouse's ability to tolerate.

Verse 10 – This is an observation made by Jesus’ disciples who are expressing human viewpoint and not divine viewpoint on the issue. Even though their words are recorded in Scripture, their words are not consistent with divine viewpoint on the matter.

**A Comparative Analysis of Select Issues Discussed in This Lesson
And Their Dispensational Setting**

Issue	Age of Israel (Mosaic Law)	Church Age	Kingdom Age (Millennium)
Sexual immorality by one married spouse that can be proven, i.e. adultery?	Capital punishment against offending spouse (e.g. Deut 22:22)	Not specified as a condition for divorce; however, divorce in general is permitted (1 Co 7:10-11)	No capital punishment taught by Jesus; however, divorce permitted (Matt 19:9). No mention of right to remarriage for the innocent spouse.
Sexual unfaithfulness that cannot be proven?	Procedure and oath taken before the priest (Num 5:11-31)	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Fornication during betrothal period?	After specified procedure followed, guilty bride/fiancée is stoned. If bride is not guilty, the groom pays fine to father of bride and is forced to marry the woman and is not permitted to divorce ever (Deut 22:13-21).	Considered a sin, but not mentioned in relationship to the effect upon marriage.	Not mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 19.
Divorce permitted?	Yes. Man could divorce his wife for any “uncleanness” and she was free to remarry (Deut 24:1-2). No mention of the husband’ right to remarry.	Yes. After divorce, they must be either reconciled or remain unmarried (1 Co 7:10-11). Also, special consideration is given for the case of a spouse who becomes a believer after marriage (1 Co 7:112-16). Many other questions not addressed, e.g. spousal abuse, non-spiritual believer spouse leaving a spiritual believer spouse, adultery, etc.	Yes. Jesus teaches that in cases of sexual unfaithfulness of any kind during marriage by one spouse, the other spouse may divorce.
Remarriage permitted after divorce?	Yes for the woman who has been granted a certificate of divorce (Deut 24:1-2) and presumably for the man, though not stated explicitly.	Not explicitly stated, though certainly implied, e.g. the unbelieving spouse remarries, thereby permitting the believing spouse to remarry or the unbelieving spouse who leaves later dies.	Not explicitly stated, but implied. If there has been “sexual immorality”, He does not prohibit the non-offending spouse from remarriage.

Point: If we are going to apply one truth from either the Age of Israel or the Kingdom Age to the Church, then consistency demands that we apply all truth. If this is a correct statement, then should we not be instituting capital punishment for offending spouses as required by the Law? The Law was put to death with Christ’s death on the Cross even though certain similarities exist between the spiritual truths found in the Law and those that govern the Church.

Point: This lesson and the above analysis is not meant to be a complete analysis of the issue of divorce and remarriage in the Church Age. Only those passages I thought necessary to explain Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 and contrast that teaching with certain Church Age principles by way of illustration.

Point: 1 Corinthians 7 needs to be interpreted with Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:26 ("because of the present distress") in mind.

Jesus Teaches on Celibacy (19:11-12)

The "this saying" to which Jesus refers is the statement by the disciples in verse 10. Eunuchs were excluded from the assembly of the Lord during the Age of Israel as dictated by the Law (Deut 23:1 cf. Lev 22:24). However, Jesus recognizes that some became eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. In other words, some became eunuchs so that they might not be tempted to ever violate any command of the Law in the area of sexuality and thereby be excluded from the kingdom that Christ was offering. They would have taken Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:8-9 very literally. It is interesting that Jesus doesn't denounce their practice and it is interesting that at the beginning of the Church Age, Philip is directed to go to the desert to find an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah 53 and explain it to him. Therefore, such eunuchs must have existed during Christ's public ministry.