

MT. 19-20 DIVORCE; RULERSHIP; HUMILITY WITH AUTHORITY



From way up north in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus took His disciples way down south to Judea by way of the river Jordan. After healing some there, the Pharisees soon arrived, again trying to trip Him up with difficult questions. We read, "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?'" (Matthew 19:3).

The Believer's Bible Commentary notes, "They asked if divorce was legal on any and every ground. No matter how He answered, He would infuriate some segment of the Jews. One school took a very liberal attitude toward divorce; another was extremely strict."

Robertson's *Word Pictures* adds, "This clause ['for every reason'] is an allusion to the dispute between the two theological schools over the meaning of Deut. 24:1. The school of Shammai took the strict and unpopular view of divorce for unchastity [sexual immorality] alone, while the school of Hillel took *the liberal and popular view of easy divorce* for any passing whim, such as if the husband saw a prettier woman or [if his wife] burnt his biscuits for breakfast. It was a dilemma and meant to do Jesus *harm* with the people."

So Jesus, instead of dealing directly with the thorny issue of divorce, explained the positive purpose of marriage and the four reasons for it. He said, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'Made them male and female,' [1. God created the male and female so they could marry] and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife [2. The couple was to leave their parents and form a new family] and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. [3. They will be united in mind and spirit, sharing life together]. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate [4. God joined the couple so it would be a sacred union meant to last]."

So then the Pharisees asked, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" The Pharisees insisted on the controversial issue of divorce to see if they could catch Him with a controversial answer.

Jesus recognized, due to the Israelite's hardness of heart—shown by cruelty and abuse in some

Israelite marriages, God had legislated under Moses a divorce as a protection for the wronged one. He replied, "Moses because of the hardness of your hearts permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Mt. 19:7).

We explain further in our paper, *Divorce and Remarriage—Statement of Belief*, "The 'hardness of your hearts' applies to all humanity, who, from the time of Adam and Eve, rejected God's way of life. While it was clearly God's intent from the beginning that all marriages be for life, it is a simple fact that not all marriages will be that lasting. Although we would not deny that God may be involved in the courtship and marriage of people prior to their calling, we believe that those who have been called by God should diligently seek God's involvement.

"Humans will accordingly make wrong choices, often with significant and serious impact on their lives. God, in His mercy, has made provision for the acceptable and satisfactory resolution of man's sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

"While the Old Testament allowed for divorce, Christ explained that this was due to the 'hardness of your hearts.' He went on to explain that this (divorce) was not the intent from the beginning. God's intent has always been that marriage is for life. Yet the New Testament does define two cases where divorce, and subsequent remarriage were acceptable without the result being declared sin (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15). These can be summarized as:

1. sexual immorality
2. an unbeliever not pleased to dwell with a believer

"...In summary, sexual misconduct would be grounds for divorce, although in general, there should be an effort to save the marriage if the conduct is not habitual. Christ gave this as the 'exception' clause. When you consider God's intent for a marriage to last until death, only when there is no presence of repentance or chance for forgiveness and reconciliation, should a divorce occur. If a divorce does occur, remarriage is possible without it being considered adultery under these conditions."

Since Christ's disciples were used to the popular lax rules of divorce under Hillel's Pharisaic

teachings, they were shocked to hear from Jesus how truly exceptional should be the law concerning divorce. They replied, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt. 19:10).

Christ was restoring the divorce law to its rightful intent--that it should only be a case of last resort. He explains that a woman should not be treated as a man's property, but as his helpmeet and companion to love. As Peter said, they are "heirs together of the grace of life" (1 P. 3:7).

He then explains that some do forsake marrying, as was His case and later, Paul, because of the dangers and a full-time dedication to fulfill God's mission. He said, "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive it" (Mt. 19:12). Notice this is a voluntary choice, not something imposed like celibacy. For the ministry, as Paul later instructed, the norm was to be the "husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2).

Next, Christ institutes the ceremony of the blessing of the children, which we faithfully observe. "Then were there brought unto Him little children, that He should put His hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto Me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And He laid His hands on them, and departed thence" (Mt. 19:14-15).

Then a young rich man who is also a ruler according to Luke 18:18, came to Him asking the "good master" or teacher, what he needed to do to inherit eternal life.

Here was a golden opportunity for Christ to have told him it was no longer necessary to obey God's commandments to inherit eternal life, but to just believe in Him. Instead He affirmed the need for keeping all of God's commandments as a means to enter into eternal life.

He asked him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.

Remember Jesus in His perfect humility didn't want to claim His own goodness, since He had not

yet finished running the course perfectly nor had He yet been glorified by God the Father.

Jesus continued, "But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness.' 'Honor your Father and your Mother,' and, 'You shall love your enemies as yourself.' The young man said to Him, 'All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mt. 19:18-22).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary notes, "Since the official standard of righteousness was the Law of Moses, Jesus told the man to obey the commandments. The ruler was perceptive for he immediately asked, 'Which ones?' Other standards of righteousness were being promoted by the Pharisees, who had added to Moses' commandments far beyond God's intention. The young man was in effect asking Jesus, 'Must I keep all the Pharisees' commandments?' Jesus replied by repeating several of the commandments from the second table of the Law...Jesus did not mention the 10th commandment concerning coveting, but He did add the summary statement, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev.19:18). The young man affirmed he had kept all these things, but he still sensed a lack (Mt. 19:20). Whether he had truly kept these commands, only God knows. The young man believed he had and yet he knew something was missing in his life. Jesus put His finger on his problem when He told him to go, sell all his possessions and give to the poor, and he would then have treasure in heaven. Such mercy toward the poor would demonstrate inner righteousness. If he were righteous (based on faith in Jesus as God), he should have given his wealth to the poor and followed Jesus. But instead, the man...went away sad...for he had great wealth. His unwillingness to relinquish his wealth showed he did not love his neighbor as himself. Thus he had not kept all the commandments, and he lacked salvation...He loved his money more than God, and thus he violated even the first commandment.

"The incident with the young ruler prompted a brief message from Jesus to His disciples. He remarked how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Since the man was trusting his riches rather than the Lord to save him, he could no more enter the kingdom than a camel (one of the largest animals used by Jews) could go through 'the eye of a needle' (*rhaphidos*, a sewing needle; *not* a small gate within another gate as is sometimes suggested). This needle's eye was an extremely small opening. The astonished disciples asked, 'Who then can be saved?' This showed the Pharisees' influence on them, for the Pharisees said God bestows wealth on those He loves. So if a wealthy person cannot make it into the kingdom [they thought] seemingly no one can! Jesus answered that salvation is a work of God. What appears to be impossible with men is what God delights to do (Mt. 17:20)."

Now comes an important truth: "Then Peter... said to Him, 'See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?' So Jesus said to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, that in the *regeneration* [Gk. *palingenesia*, rebirth], when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mt. 19:27-29).

Here is a clear statement of the believer's reward—not going to heaven but being part of the kingdom of God on earth. The 12 apostles will then rule each tribe of Israel that will still be living during the Millennium. The twelve apostles had forsaken their wealth to follow Jesus and would receive much more. Mark 10:30 has the complete rendering, "he...shall receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life."

Next Jesus adds a puzzling phrase He used at different times, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." He then gives two parables to explain this concept--the first one explains it doesn't matter *when* you are called but *how* you end

your race. For some called in the first century might end up far behind those called during the end time. The other parable is that those who consider themselves *first in position* might end up being *last* and those considering themselves *last in importance* could end up being *first in the kingdom*.

The parable of the day laborers, where some are hired early in the morning and others late in the afternoon, yet all receive the same payment is symbolic of when some are called early in life and have a lot of toil in overcoming sin and being obedient, yet they receive the same reward as those who are called later in life, who are faithful for a shorter period of time and yet receive the same reward--eternal life. Some might not think that is fair—but in fact nobody remotely deserves any such reward, and it is only because of God's incredible and unmerited generosity (grace) that one receives it.

As Christ said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong...Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Mt. 20:13-16).

Jesus then warns them of His coming sufferings, which they didn't understand at the time. Next, the mother of John and James came, probably hearing from them that they would sit as rulers judging the 12 tribes of Israel in the kingdom and she wanted even more for them and asked that they sit on the right and left hand of Jesus. When the other ten found out, they were greatly upset that there was jockeying for top power. But Christ corrected them saying they would not rule by seeking to be first, but seeking to be the best servers possible. He said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles *lord it over them*, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, *let him be your servant*. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:25-28).

What a great example Jesus Christ left for all of us to follow about godly servant leadership!