

Chapter 76: Marriage from the Beginning

Matthew 19:1–12

In Matthew 19, we enter a new section of the Gospel. In this section, Jesus returns to many of the activities that he did earlier in his ministry, especially by teaching and healing. Yet, there is a major difference between Jesus' earliest ministry and what we see here: the shadow of the cross looms over the section. As Jesus moves toward Jerusalem to be crucified, the cross is never far from his mind (e.g., Matt. 20:17–19). Nevertheless, Jesus still has much to teach before laying down his life at the cross. Here, we learn that *Jesus sanctifies us through faithfulness in marriage*.

Marriage from the Beginning (Matt. 19:1–6)

For the fourth time, Matthew uses the word sometimes translated as “it came to pass” (KJV; ἐγένετο; *egeneto*) to conclude one major section of Jesus' “sayings” and begins another section (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).¹ While Matthew has recorded the majority of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (in the north, west of the Jordan River), we now read that Jesus “went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” (v. 1). From this point forward, Jesus will be making his trek southward toward Judea, in order to culminate his life and ministry in Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. In Matthew 19–20, Jesus will be teaching “on the road” on the way toward Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1).²

Matthew's description that Jesus traveled “in the region of Judea beyond the Jordan” is somewhat puzzling, since Judea is in the south and on the *west* side of the Jordan River, while “beyond the Jordan” is a description that typically describes the land *east* of the Jordan River. So, while some commentators understand this to mean that Jesus traveled southward on the west side of the Jordan (through Samaria), most commentators believe that this is a reference to the region of Perea east of the Jordan, which was sometimes called “Judea” due to the sizable Jewish population living there.³ This idea is supported by the idea that Jews commonly took this path through Perea in order to avoid Samaria, “which was especially hostile to Jews who were going to the festivals at Jerusalem.”⁴ In v. 2, Matthew tells us that “large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.” While Jesus had largely withdrawn from the crowds of Jews when he traveled northward into Gentile territory and then southward again through Galilee (Matt. 15:21–18:35), once again we read that Jesus healed the sick, as in his earlier ministry in Galilee (Matt. 4:12–15:20).⁵

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 726.

² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 287.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 543.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 726.

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 713.

While Jesus was there ministering, Matthew writes that “Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’” (v. 3). For the second time, Matthew uses the verbs “came...to” (προσῆλθον; *proselthōn*) and “tested/tempted” (πειράζοντες) to describe the actions of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:1), echoing the language from Jesus’ temptation when Satan, “the tempter” (ὁ πειράζων; *ho peirazōn*), “came” (προσελθὼν; *proselthōn*) to Jesus (Matt. 4:3). Here, the Pharisees attempted to trick Jesus by posing him a question that touched on a major dispute within rabbinic Judaism at the time.

The Pharisees’ question centered on the language of Deuteronomy 24:1 (see v. 7): “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house....” The stricter school, following Rabbi Shammai, believed that “some indecency” limited the lawful cause of divorce to some kind of sexual immorality. The looser school, following Rabbi Hillel, taught that “some indecency” had a much broader range of applicability, including burning the husband’s dinner. Even looser was Rabbi Akiba, who taught that the phrase “finds now favor in his eyes” permitted a husband to divorce a wife if he found another woman to be more attractive “in his eyes.”⁶ Regarding this question, Morris writes, “With such a variety of opinions the subject of divorce was a veritable minefield; thus the Pharisees may well have thought that it did not matter greatly which way Jesus answered; he would offend many people whatever he said. Even Jewish men who had no intention of divorcing their wives might be expected to defend strongly their right to do so.”⁷

Jesus, however, rejected the logic of the Pharisees by starting his discussion at a different point: at creation itself:⁸ “He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother⁹ and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?”’” (vv. 4–5). Osborne observes that Jesus’ reply expects a positive answer: “You have read, haven’t you?...goes back to Matt 12:3, 5, where Jesus also challenged the Pharisees’ understanding of the Word of God. They have read it but don’t realize the implications.”¹⁰ While Jesus rejected the standard rabbinical teaching on marriage, he nevertheless employed a standard rabbinical principle of interpretation, called “the more original, the

⁶ For more details of this discussion, see Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 727–28.

⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 480. In this way, we might observe a similarity in the modern discourse on abortion, where even those who do not intend to get an abortion (e.g., women beyond childbearing years) nevertheless continue to fight for retaining the right to an abortion. Whereas the current slogan among some women is, “my body, my choice,” the slogan among men in Jesus’ day was something like, “my marriage, my choice.” Both arguments ignore the larger responsibilities to the other party involved (the baby in the womb and the wife in the marriage).

⁸ “The way in which the Pharisees propounded their question by asking, ‘Is it lawful (ἐξεστίν)?’ revealed that they considered marriage and its dissolution a matter of legislation. They expected Jesus to enter into a discussion of Deut. 24:1.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 728–29.)

⁹ On the nature of a man’s “leaving” his father and mother, Nolland writes: “In Israelite culture the married couple in fact normally lived in or near the home of the man’s parents, not the woman’s. So the leaving is not literal. It is perhaps all the more significant for not being so.” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 772.)

¹⁰ Osborne, *Matthew*, 703.

weightier.”¹¹ In this way, he was not arguing against the validity of Deuteronomy 24:1, but only showing how that verse must be read in context with God’s original purposes for marriage. On this point, France writes,

There is a saying, “Hard cases make bad law,” and it may be suggested that they make even worse ethics....Those who start from Deut 24:1–4 will have as their basic presupposition that divorce is to be expected, the question being only how it is to be regulated. Those who start from Gen 1–2 will see any separation of what God has joined together as always an evil; circumstances may prove it to be the lesser evil, but that can never make it less than an infringement of the primary purpose of God for marriage.¹²

By developing a doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage exclusively from Deuteronomy 24:1, the Pharisees were legalistically looking for loopholes that enabled men to get out of marriages. By identifying a hard-to-interpret passage that spoke of edge cases where divorce was permissible, they believed that they had discovered a “lawful” way to justify their evil despising of marriage.

Thus, Jesus sets out a doctrine of marriage that recognizes the fundamental unity of the marriage relationship, where the two have become one flesh. The image is striking, not only for conveying something of the nature of the sexual relationship in marriage, but also by portraying the horror of dissolving what God meant to be indissoluble: “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (v. 6). Thus, Calvin writes that, “at the beginning God *joined the male to the female*, so that the two made an entire man; and therefore he who *divorces his wife* tears from him, as it were, the half of himself. But nature does not allow any man to tear in pieces his own body.”¹³ Jesus had taught something similar earlier in Matthew 5:32; however, France notes that the discussion there “was subsumed within a wider discussion of discipleship in relation to the demands of the law, whereas here it stands alone and is more fully developed. This enables the disciples to express here their reaction to what they regard as an impossibly idealistic ethic.”¹⁴

Marriage for the Hard of Heart (Matt. 19:7–9)

Having heard Jesus’ initial response, the Pharisees attempt to expose Jesus as foolish by pointing out the passage from Deuteronomy 24:1 where the law clearly permitted divorce: “They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’” (v. 7). They came to “tempt” him, so, as Calvin notes, they were happy whether he had compromised himself by pandering to the low morality of the crowds or whether he demonstrated himself to be too rigorous for popular approval.¹⁵ Believing that Jesus has stepped too far in the latter direction, they believe that they can triumph over the Lord by their clever debate.

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 728–29.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 714.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:378.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 713.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:377–78.

Jesus skillfully turns the question by drawing the attention of his inquisitors to the major change that took place after the institution of marriage at creation: the fall into sin. The ideal for marriage remains, and we must still pursue that ideal in our marriages. Nevertheless, Jesus recognizes that the entrance of sin into this world has created situations that are less than ideal: “He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery’” (vv. 8–9). While insisting that men or women may not freely break the marriage covenant by divorcing their spouses and remarrying at will (since to do so would constitute adultery), Jesus nevertheless observes that sexual immorality within marriage also breaks the covenant of marriage, leaving the innocent party free to divorce and to remarry.¹⁶

On the surface, Jesus’ conclusion sounds something like Rabbi Shammai’s stricter interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1; however, France observes that Jesus’ logic about marriage is fundamentally different because of its starting point:

Jesus’ teaching starts rather from the “one flesh” of Gen 2:24, so that it is only because “sexual unfaithfulness” has already violated the unity of the one flesh that the marriage must be regarded as no longer intact. Shammai was concerned with a man’s right to initiate divorce, Jesus with the formal recognition that the marriage has already been broken by the wife’s action.¹⁷

In this way, Jesus is able to fully affirm the sanctity of marriage while also recognizing the reality of sin that necessitates divorce in some situations.

Marriage for Singles (Matt. 19:10–12)

We do not read more about the reactions of the Pharisees at this point. Instead, Matthew tells us about the astonished reactions of the disciples: “The disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry’” (v. 10). Why should they react so strongly? Morris is likely correct that “they probably had no intention of making use of the provision for divorce, but they found it comforting that the provision was there in case of need.”¹⁸ Even so, their reaction thoroughly misses the point that God created marriage to be permanent for our *good*: “it is a display of base ingratitude that, from the dread or dislike of a single inconvenience, they reject a wonderful gift of God...But if God has ordained marriage for the general advantage of mankind, though it may be attended by some things that are disagreeable, it is not on that account to be despised.”¹⁹

¹⁶ “For the law was made solely for the protection of the women, that they might not suffer any disgrace after they had been unjustly rejected. Hence we infer, that it was rather a punishment inflicted on the husbands, than an indulgence or permission fitted to inflame their lust....the wife has an equal right: for he is not the lord of his body; and therefore when, by committing adultery, he has dissolved the marriage, the wife is set at liberty.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:381, 384.)

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 721.

¹⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 484.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:385–86.

Even so, Jesus acknowledges that there are some who should not marry: “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (vv. 11–12). In the ancient world, there were two kinds of eunuchs: those who were born without properly formed sexual organs, and those who were castrated at a young age. In both cases, the lack of physical sexual organs meant that those individuals did not have the same level of sexual desire as others. Lenski notes that Jesus speaks of those two kinds of eunuchs because “Jesus is speaking of the believer’s ἐγκράτεια [*enkrateia*], his self-mastery, self-control as far as sexual desires are concerned....He mentions [the other two classes] only in order to cast light on another class, because he intends to call also this class ‘eunuchs,’ namely in a spiritual sense.”²⁰ These are not merely those who can control their outward, physical actions, but their inward, spiritual desires. God does not call us to a life of stoic singleness, but he does bless some with a supernatural gift of self-control over sexual desires in order to free those single individuals for wider service in the kingdom.²¹

Discussion Questions

1. How does Matthew mark v. 1 as the beginning of a new section in the Gospel? What is changing geographically? What is changing thematically? What is the nature of the controversy in which the Pharisees try to entangle Jesus (v. 3)? How does Matthew portray their actions as similar to Satan (Matt. 4:3)? How does Jesus change the framing of the question about marriage? How does the principle Jesus uses in vv. 4–6 address issues that we face today?
2. What does Deuteronomy 24:1 teach about divorce? How did the Pharisees misuse the verse to justify their efforts to retain the right to divorce undesirable wives? How does Jesus understand the reality of divorce? In other words, how does he acknowledge the reality of divorce, while also insisting that divorce was never part of God’s original plan for marriage? How does Jesus’ teaching here speak to our own culture’s views of marriage and divorce?
3. Why did the disciples conclude from Jesus’ teaching that it would be better to refrain from marrying altogether (v. 10)? Does Jesus agree with them on this point? Who, then, should refrain from marrying, according to Jesus’ teaching (vv. 11–12)? What does it mean for people to “make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 12)? Why is it important that those who have this gift of continency should “receive it” (v. 12)?
4. What are your views about marriage? How do you think that your views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage may have been shaped by the people around you? Have those closest to you been a good influence about the nature of marriage, or a bad influence? How have you approached pursuing marriage (if single) or pursuing the permanence and flourishing of your marriage (if

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 738–39.

²¹ For more, see Jacob Gerber, “God Has Not Called You to a Life of Stoic Singleness (1 Cor. 7:9),” October 2, 2019. <<https://jacobgerber.org/god-has-not-called-you-to-a-life-of-stoic-singleness-1-cor-7-9/>>

married)? What particularly strikes you about Jesus' teaching here?