

Matthew 19:1-15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 19 verses 1 to 15. Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. A large crowds followed him and he healed them there. And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? 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 mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to him, why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? 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. The disciples said to him, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry. But he said to them, 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.

Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them and went away.

In the first half of Matthew 19, Jesus leaves Galilee and enters Judea and is immediately tested by the Pharisees concerning his teaching. Jesus is asked by the Pharisees to weigh in on the debate between schools of legal opinion of the day, between Hillel and Shammai. The difference is related to the interpretation of Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 1 following. When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes through a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house. The school of Hillel had a very extensive list of things that could be included under the some form of indecency in the wife, whereas the school of Shammai held a far more restrictive understanding. They're trying to test him. We should bear in mind that John the Baptist had just lost his life for speaking out against the divorce and remarriage of Herod. The Pharisees knew that Jesus, if he spoke out on this issue, would be placing himself in dangerous political positions relative to the Herods, but also taking a controversial view on the meaning of the law that would put him on one side or another of a pretty fractious debate. And they cunningly thought that this would give them some sort of leverage over him. So there are two things going on here, an attempt to entrap Jesus in a dangerous political statement, and also an attempt to get Jesus to take a side in a divisive Jewish debate on the meaning of the law. Jesus does not answer their question directly. Rather, he challenges them concerning the biblical teaching. Where do we find Moses' actual teaching regarding divorce and marriage? If we start with Deuteronomy chapter 24, an obscure case law, we're going about it all wrong. Rather, we must begin at the very beginning. It begins with Genesis chapter 1 and 2. God made them male and female, and a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. That is where we find the teaching on marriage. What Deuteronomy chapter 24 does is come in as an allowance for the sake of the hardness of the heart of the people. It allows them to divorce their wives, but it's a departure from the fundamental intent of marriage, which is lifelong union. What God has joined together, let no man separate. And this allowance, this concession, is not a command concerning divorce. It's a falling away from that thing that should give us a clear perspective of what marriage and divorce truly are. That divorce is an undermining of God's fundamental intent concerning marriage. That two

people should become one flesh in an indissoluble union. The difference between a concession and a command is very important. A concession is an accommodation to human weakness and sin. A recognition that in our fallen state, human beings are imperfectible. And good laws will make allowances for the sinfulness and the immaturity of people in their societies. Good laws are not counsels of perfection. They must deal with the reality, the messy reality of sinful human lives. And the law that Moses gave is an example of such a law.

[5 : 15] It's a good law for a hard-hearted people. But it is not good that people are hard-hearted, nor is a concession given to a hard-hearted people, a good north star by which to guide our understanding of marriage and God's values concerning it. Among many other things, for instance, parenting is an exercise in the establishment of justice and the ordering of a just society. And parents will know that there are a great many suboptimal and even bad behaviours that they may have to accommodate or mitigate in their children, because their children currently lack the wisdom or the good character to act as they would in some ideal world. And the law that Moses gives in Deuteronomy chapter 24 is an example of this. Good laws are accommodated to the societies and the persons for which they are designed. They are informed by the deeper and the absolute moral law, but they are accommodated to particular circumstances and persons. If you allowed your teenagers the same liberties as you do your toddlers, it would not be a good thing. Rather, you need to give certain liberties to your toddlers that you don't give to your teenagers because they still have a lot to learn.

When the Pharisees respond to Jesus, Jesus highlights the problem with their response. They ask about what Moses commanded, but yet they are like teenagers who are reminding their parents of all the things that they allowed them to get away with as toddlers. But yet as teenagers, they're supposed to have grown up beyond those things. They don't need the same allowances. They don't need the same concessions. They should be mature enough to know how to act themselves. Moses's concessions concerning divorce allowed for divorce, but they did not approve of it. It was an accommodation to the sinfulness and the imperfectibility of human society, not a practice that was to be viewed in any respect positively. We might think of the practices of slavery or polygamy in a similar light, practices that were permitted and regulated but never celebrated or encouraged. These practices were never God's good intention for humanity, but tolerated for a time as an accommodation to sin, weakness, immaturity and imperfectibility. To find out what is really commanded, what God really wants, we have to look back further to God's creational intent for humanity.

And so Jesus joins Genesis 1 and 2 together to highlight the permanent unity that was always God's intent for marriage. This is different and distinguished from laws that are accommodated to the hardness of human hearts. Now Jesus' teaching more generally draws us back to these two great horizons, the horizons of the original creation and of the future restoration of all things. And this has the effect of significantly reframing the question of divorce. The Hillelites and the Shammaiites both approach the question of divorce primarily within the horizon of the Mosaic body of laws and fail adequately to consider the horizon of God's creational intent. The result is a loss of our sense of the way that divorce undermines God's intent for humanity. Divorce is a tragic accommodation to human sinfulness, not something that is positively allowed. Jesus may here contrast Moses and God.

[8 : 27] Moses is the divinely inspired prophet administering the moral law in a particular historical situation, but God is the author of the timeless moral law. There's a sort of legalism which can snatch at all sorts of allowances that are given in a law accommodated to human sinfulness and imperfection, rather than pursuing the righteousness that it should direct us towards. Such allowances excuse us from the higher standard of the divine righteousness. Note that Jesus doesn't teach that Moses was wrong to allow for divorce under such circumstances. Such allowances were made on account of people's sinfulness and hardness of heart, but they were not themselves sinful allowances. The Old Testament law provides us with a number of conditions in which divorce is treated as permissible, and I believe that the New Testament does not just abrogate those. Accommodation to the reality of human sinfulness and weakness really is necessary for good law. Whether it's serious abuse, desertion, adultery, or some other sort of sin or failure, divorce may be appropriately permitted. We should also recognise that in such circumstances we can't abstract the specific action of divorce from the broader failures of permanent exclusive union that might have precipitated it. While the act of divorce is an act of very grave moral weight, a purposeful act that

ends a marriage, the one who initiates it should not be treated as if they bore the entire weight of the blame for the failed marriage. What Jesus' teaching does then is not to delegitimise the teaching of Moses, or even to suggest an alternative legal code to replace it.

Rather what it does is relativise it. The law of Moses and all other legal codes that are necessarily accommodated to human sinfulness are not the north star of righteousness. Where necessary accommodations to this sinful age exist, they are signs of how estranged we have become from God's good purpose for humanity. Because we are a hard-hearted and a sinful people, God permits divorce in the case of adultery.

But lifelong, permanent and indissoluble and exclusive unity was always his intent. We see the same thing in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, where where at all possible a couple are supposed to pursue reunion, to pursue reconciliation and forgiveness. Now that will not always be possible. There will be situations where it is wise to divorce. Divorce in itself is not a sin, but it is a sign of how badly things have gone wrong.

And where at all possible we should be people of the kingdom. People who pursue reconciliation, restoration, healing, setting things right that have gone wrong. This teaching can all be very troubling for us. We live in a society in which both divorce and serial extramarital relations are rampant.

It's a very hard teaching today, just as it was in Jesus' day. We would like God to tell us that it is okay to divorce under conditions x, y and z, but that isn't what we are told. Rather, we are given the original intent of creation as the standard of our measure, with the concessions appearing more clearly for what they are against that background. Tolerated, but not positively validated, ways of negotiating human rebellion against God's purpose in marriage. The fact of God's creational establishment of marriage is a measure by which we must consider divorce. We may break faith with and reject our prior vow in the self-contradiction of divorce, but not in such a way as places us beyond the bounds of God's grace. And the church is bound both to uphold the institutions of marriage and to present God's grace to those in the tragic situation of failed marriages. The possibility of a calling back to the abandoned task of marriage to a particular person can often be there. Sometimes, however, the conditions for this don't exist. And the difficult question of whether someone should, not just can, get married again is one that people will often struggle with.

[12:37] There is some gospel to be seen in Moses' law. God is not allowing people to slip beyond the reach of his grace and restoration, even in the messiness of their compromised lives. God can speak his law even into the lives that have been tangled up by sin and failure, by things that have gone wrong. God can still speak his grace into those situations. Divorce and remarriage don't cause people to slip off God's map. But yet, that truth must always be held alongside the other truth, that this was not God's intent from the beginning. The disciples are startled by the toughness of Jesus' teaching. If marriage is really this serious, it would seem to be a trap that you don't want to get caught in. If you have to stick with your wife under all these circumstances, and you can't just abandon her for various reasons, then it's maybe not something that you want to get in. Jesus responds with another startling teaching. He talks about those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. Now, there are many different types of eunuchs. Some are born eunuchs. You can think of intersex persons particularly, people who can't bear children, people who may even, in some extreme cases, have indeterminate sex. Then there are those who have been made eunuchs by other human beings, castrated and made to serve in particular capacities. And Jesus talks here about a further type of eunuch.

Those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom. When we think about eunuchs, probably what we think of first is their giving up of sexual pleasure and partnership. But in Jesus' day, what was probably most prominent was the fact that they gave up progeny and legacy. They committed themselves completely to the cause of the kingdom that they aligned themselves with. So if a eunuch served a particular king, they were completely personally invested in serving that kingdom because their entire hope and destiny for the future lay upon the destiny of the kingdom. They had no children to bear their name after them. What they were going to leave behind was the kingdom itself. In speaking about those who have become eunuchs for the kingdom of God, Jesus is likely talking about people who have given up the prospect of having marriage and children to commit themselves completely for the kingdom of God. Now this isn't the same thing as singleness. It's not just a statement about how good singleness is as a thing in itself. Rather, it's about people who have given up marriage for the sake of throwing in their lot completely with the cause of the

kingdom. You can think about Paul as an example of this, as one who did not take a wife, or maybe was widowed and did not take another wife, in order that he might serve the kingdom of God completely. One can also imagine people being a bit shocked by Jesus using the example of eunuchs as associated with the kingdom of heaven. Eunuchs were seen, among other things, as unmanly, as those who had been quite literally emasculated. We should not miss the scandal of the association that Jesus is drawing here. The people who would serve his kingdom would often seem unmanly to other people of their day. They were not playing the games of honour that people of their day were playing. They were peacemakers, rather men who were constantly looking for chances to prove their manliness in war. They were people who would turn the other cheek when offended, when their honour was attacked. And what man will not defend his honour? They were defined by suffering, rather than by the infliction of violence and power. They were people defined by service of and concern for the weak, rather than mastery over others. They were people who forgave, rather than pursuing vengeance. And in this particular example, they were also people who were prepared to give up having children, and give up having marriages, for the sake of serving their Lord, by following him to the final unmanly indignity of the cross. While Jesus very clearly extols manly virtues in certain other contexts, and calls for his disciples to express and display some of these virtues, and we see these things celebrated elsewhere in scripture, we should never forget the scandal that his teaching presented to men of his day, and to men of our own. After this teaching, children are brought to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples rebuked those bringing the children. Children are distractions from the business of men, and they lack honour and status. But yet, Jesus pays attention to them. He places a child in the midst of his disciples, and says that they need to be made like that child. Once again, Jesus is challenging some of the reigning values, particularly among men of his day. Values that constantly privileged the strong over the weak. Men over women. Adults over children. Jesus, without denying or undermining the differences between these groups, radically reconfigures the orders of value that lead people to exalt one group over another. Not only does he welcome such children, he declares that to such belongs the kingdom of heaven. A question to consider, looking at our own societies and our churches, an outside observer would probably not be led to believe that the exemplary society that we hold up above all others is one in which children are at the centre. What are some of the ways in which we can reform the lives of our churches and societies so as more fully to express Jesus' teaching at this point?

Thank you.