

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 65, Chapter 19

We begin chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel today, and it begins with a bang. Immediately some dicey subjects arise; dicey for the 1st-century Jewish community and they remain problematic for God worshippers to this day. The subjects are divorce, monogamy, and celibacy. Before we're through with this section I have little doubt that I will bother most of you or possibly offend some of you, because facing what the Bible actually has to say (and does NOT say) about these subjects makes it challenging and well out of step with today's Western society perspectives and customs, and that includes some branches of Christianity.

Before I say any more, let's open our Bibles and read Matthew chapter 19.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 19 all

The setting is this: Yeshua determines it is time for Him to leave the Galilee where He has done nearly all of His ministry work. Thus He is completing the bulk of His teaching of His 12 disciples although it will continue. He will not return to the Galilee in the flesh. The next time we find Him in the Galilee is in a somewhat altered form after His crucifixion and resurrection.

The Book of Mark offers a similar narrative beginning in chapter 10. Let's read it to get his perspective.

READ MARK CHAPTER 10:1 - 12

At first glance these accounts are generally the same; however, there are some

key differences from Matthew, which I'll address as we encounter them.

Returning to Matthew. Since His destination was Judea, why cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and walk down the east side of the Jordan River? Simply put, Yeshua didn't want to travel through Samaria. The Jews of that day had little regard for, and some an actual hatred of, Samaria and of therefore of Samaritans. Samaritans were a mixed population of gentiles, Jews, and Jews that were married to gentiles and so bore what Jews would have considered half-breed children. There were also small cells of various of the so-called 10 Lost Tribes living there as they had for nearly 8 centuries and apparently they did not practice the official Judaism of that era, even having their own separate Temple and priesthood.

We discussed in earlier lessons that Jesus taught that in some measure, appearances matter. He didn't, and we can't, just do things in some strict adherence (as we see it) to our faith beliefs in disregard of our cultural norms. Naturally we are not to disobey the Torah or break a biblical moral law; but we also have to pay attention to those cultural norms and traditions that helps to define our society, or we will be cast as outsiders and be ineffective in reaching others with the Good News. While I have no doubt that He harbored no personal ill will against the Samaritans... and in fact, as God on earth, loved them... it would have made Him an even more controversial figure among Jews than He already was if He as much as walked through Samaritan territory to get to Judea... because Jews (especially Galileans) avoided Samaria like the plague. So Yeshua took the longer route from the Galilee that wound along the east side of the Jordan River, and then crossed over probably somewhere near Jericho where John the Baptist had been known to operate.

We're told that large crowds followed Him. The route that He took from the Galilee to Judea went through the district of Perea that was not taboo to Jews, so many Jews lived there. Christ's reputation as a miracle healer had spread far and wide and so where ever He went throngs of people followed Him that needed healing of every sort. Matthew remarks that Yeshua indeed healed them... which He always did since His heart was always for the hurting, the lame, the sick, and the downtrodden. Here we encounter our first difference between Matthew and Mark. In Matthew Christ healed; in Mark He taught. I suspect that He did both; it's only that with each Gospel, the writer chose to highlight one over the other and not both. So whereas most Bible commentators see this difference as a conflict of what happened, I see no such thing; it is simply an issue of the writer's

perspective and emphasis. I'll remind you: Matthew was writing from a Believing Jewish perspective with an intended audience of Believing Jews. Mark was writing from a perspective of addressing a gentile audience and this had much to do with what they each chose to focus on.

In the CJB, verse 2 says that some Pharisees (who always seemed to mingle in with the common folk that followed Yeshua) tried to "trap" Him with a question about divorce. Some Bible versions say test, others say tempt. The Greek word is *peirazo*. The Greek lexicons say that it means to test someone or something, usually by trying to ascertain what a person thinks about something. Therefore I think the CJB saying they were trying to "trap" Jesus is a bit off the mark as the word carries an ominous tone with it. What the Pharisees were really trying to determine was something rather legitimate in that day: was Christ's view of divorce in line with the School of Hillel, or with the School of Shammai? The one view is something that we could call liberal, the other more strict or fundamentalist. Generally speaking, the Pharisees went along with Hillel's teaching on divorce, which was the more liberal. That is, Hillel's *Halakhah* (Jewish Law, Tradition) was that there were several legitimate reasons for divorce, while Shammai's *Halakhah* was that there was really only one. And Mark and Matthew also differ on this.

Mark has it as a very broad question the Pharisees asked: "is it lawful to permit a man to divorce his wife". Matthew adds a qualifier to that question. He says the question was: "is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife **on any ground whatever?**" Different Bible versions word this slightly differently from one another, but they all amount to the same thing. The question is: can there be many different reasons to divorce a wife? There is an important nuance for us to notice. In both Mark and Matthew, the word lawful (is it lawful or permitted) is in Greek *exesti*. The CJB assumes that lawful means Torah law; but I have my doubts. I think it means it in the way most Jews would have seen it: it means lawful in the sense of permitted according to the *Halakhah* of the day as a representative interpretation of the Torah. In other words, just as today when a layman might ask a Pastor a theological question, the Pastor is typically going to answer based on his denomination's doctrines, and not necessarily what the Bible strictly says, or perhaps a combination of both. So Jesus responds in this way:

^{CJB} **Matthew 19:4-5** ⁴ "...Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, ⁵ and that he said, 'For this reason a man

should leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two are to become one flesh'?

So Yeshua says that the answer to this question must necessarily go back to the time of Adam and Eve... long before there was a written Torah or Law of Moses. This doesn't mean that the Law of Moses didn't have a divorce clause; Deuteronomy 24 speaks of it.

CJB Deuteronomy 24:1 "Suppose a man marries a woman and consummates the marriage but later finds her displeasing, because he has found her offensive in some respect. He writes her a divorce document, gives it to her and sends her away from his house. ² She leaves his house, goes and becomes another man's wife; ³ but the second husband dislikes her and writes her a get, gives it to her and sends her away from his house; or the second husband whom she married dies. ⁴ In such a case her first husband, who sent her away, may not take her again as his wife, because she is now defiled. It would be detestable to ADONAI, and you are not to bring about sin in the land ADONAI your God is giving you as your inheritance.

We won't deal with the multiple aspects of divorce in the Deuteronomy 24 law, but you can go to TorahClass.com and find some in-depth teaching on it. The point is that divorce is indeed part of the Law of Moses, but it can only be applied narrowly and not broadly. What Yeshua says also raises the issue of monogamy. Thus, says Christ, the two (male and female) become one so no one should split apart what God has joined together. Yeshua is quoting from 2 places in the Book of Genesis.

CJB Genesis 1:27 So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.

And:

CJB Genesis 2:24 This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh.

So marriage, divorce, and monogamy get all wrapped up together as something that cannot be understood properly without considering them all. The Genesis verses (and thus Jesus) also gets specific about what marriage amounts to: a

man and a woman leaving their parents and becoming joined together as a couple. It pains me to have to emphasize the obvious: from a biblical standpoint... from God's standpoint... marriage is exclusively between a male and female. Gay marriage is an oxymoron from the biblical perspective and of course is but a modern Western civilization attempt to subvert and destroy the God-ordained institution and purpose of marriage, which is to be fruitful and multiply.

Please notice that Yeshua quoted the Torah as His answer, thus continuing the proof of Matthew 5:17 - 19 that He did not come to abolish or destroy the Law of Moses, but rather to uphold it, teach it, demonstrate the spirit of The Law as opposed to mechanical obedience to it, and how it ought to look in application.

In response to Christ's words the Pharisees ask: if that's so, then why did Moses give the commandment that a man could divorce his wife if he gave her a **get** (a **get** is a Hebrew document of divorce)? Again I want to stress; there is nothing ominous or against Jesus going on here. This subject was a raging debate during the 1st century in the Jewish faith, and so Jesus wasn't going to get in trouble no matter how He might have answered. Naturally the Pharisees wanted Him to believe and teach their viewpoint and agree with their traditions on the matter. But there would be no penalty other than their growing disdain for Him if Yeshua taught otherwise. And in fact, He did teach otherwise. Yeshua agreed with Shammai's stricter code for divorce as the standard and not the Pharisees' more liberal approach.

Christ answers the Pharisees quite reasonable inquiry of His stance about divorce with the words:

^{CJB} **Matthew 19:8** ***"Moshe allowed you to divorce your wives because your hearts are so hardened. But this is not how it was at the beginning.***

Yeshua is explaining (or better, properly interpreting) the Deuteronomy 24 passage about marriage, divorce, and possible re-marriage. What He says is of course true, but it hit the Pharisees square in the face (like a cream pie thrown at them) because He says it is the fault of the hardened hearts of God's people that a system of divorce is even necessary. So in addition to Jesus saying that He has adopted the Pharisee's rival's position on divorce, He is also saying that divorce was only allowed by God due to hardened hearts (sin), and it therefore makes the Pharisees' position on the matter a result of their own hardened hearts to allow such liberal use of the Law of divorce.

Let me clear something up because grasping the nuances of the Hebrew mindset is critical in interpreting the New Testament. When the Jews (including Jesus) say things like "**Moses** allowed you to divorce your wives because..." the reference to Moses making the law or commandment was just a colloquial way of speaking. That is, it was understood that God gave the laws and commands to Moses and Moses merely wrote them down. There is no implication that it was Moses who created the laws and commandments. From the time the Law was given to Moses until His death, Moses was more or less God's scribe and the supreme earthly Judge presiding over the Law that God gave to Israel. Just as Christians call the legal section of the Torah the Law of Moses so did the Hebrews of every age. Thus for Israel the term "The Law of Moses" was often abbreviated to just "Moses" since Moses was the Mediator.

Verse 9 makes Yeshua's position on divorce unequivocal. Only on account of sexual immorality... unfaithfulness in the marriage... was divorce legitimate in God's eyes. He has essentially spoken Shammai's **Halakhah** on the matter. So the Pharisees would not have walked away very happy about what Yeshua said. But His statement then does something that I'm sure upset all the males listening, just as it might upset many males listening to me right now. If a man divorces His wife for any reason other than she has been sexually unfaithful to him, and the man then remarries, the man becomes guilty of adultery. That is a man who divorces his wife because of her infidelity, and then he remarries, does so legally and without consequence in God's eyes. By no means does this mean that divorce still wasn't permitted for other reasons. But all those other reasons for divorce bring a dire consequence upon the man who divorces his wife and then remarries: God declares him guilty of adultery. The Hebrews always had a hard time accepting and obeying this, just as Christians do, because no one wants to live a lifetime in an unhappy marriage.

Look; we need to grasp that Yeshua was not reading more into Deuteronomy 24 than was there and thus elevating the Law's stance on divorce to a higher and more rigid level that He favored. Rather, it was **because** He well understood the Pharisee's liberalized doctrine on divorce that He used the words and examples that He did. He wanted to expose that while the Pharisees walked around claiming to be the righteous upholders of the Law of Moses, in fact they tended to ignore the Law on the difficult matters often taking the more populist view and following Tradition instead. They saw themselves as men of the people and so wanted to make religious rulings... **Halakhot**...that were more well-liked by the majority of the common folks. They preferred their Traditions that often stretched

and twisted and contorted God's Law like Silly-Putty in order to increase their status and gain approval of the people. Without apology I can say that the Church (in general) has followed suit... but of course with our own but different Traditions that equally distort God's laws and commands or most often simply throw them all out, wholesale.

Now we can understand why an unnamed one of Christ's disciples, after hearing this conversation, says that it seems when one understands the severity of the consequence of divorce, it must be better not to marry at all! Why? Because the many flexible reasons for divorce that the Pharisees preached (and that the 12 disciples had up to now accepted as the norm), suddenly evaporated. This made getting married a far more precarious matter because getting out of a marriage a man no longer wanted was now understood as having serious consequences. And yet it seems at every turn we are confronted with still another fact of divorce and marriage. So if one divorces his wife for her adultery, is he actually free to marry again? While there is an implication that it is, that question is not directly answered. Various Rabbis and Christian Theologians return different answers. Looking upon what was no doubt a batch of frowns and perplexed faces Christ says that not everyone grasps this teaching, only those for whom it is meant. Translation: this is a very hard teaching and it goes against centuries of Jewish custom and Tradition. Good luck trying to work against it. But it also is reminiscent of something Yeshua said back in Matthew chapter 13.

^{CJB} **Matthew 13:11** *He answered, "Because it has been given to you to know the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but it has not been given to them."*

Knowing the secrets to the Kingdom of Heaven are reserved only for the members of the Kingdom; but that hardly means that every member of the Kingdom grasps these secrets equally. Like everything else about our faith, it takes time and experience to mature in it. One cannot expect a new Believer to know the many mysteries of the Kingdom the way an Elder will. And not every secret understanding is going to sit well with us; marriage and divorce is one of these because in many cases it goes against what we want that we think will make us happier.

Being single was not the norm for an adult Jewish male. And I imagine in some ways it made Jesus stand out because he was around 30 years old and not married. So in some ways He is justifying His personal decision NOT to marry. He lists some reasons (it is certainly not an exhaustive list) why a man might

choose not to marry. Some because they just don't want to. Others because they were, sadly, made into Eunuchs to serve a master. Some did so for religious reasons, dedicating their lives to their faith, and thus marriage would be both a personal hindrance and also unfair to a wife. Yeshua repeats that only some to whom He is speaking will understand this teaching and point of view.

I have no doubt that just like in our time, men of Yeshua's generation looked around their society, saw the many unhappy marriages, the wreckage of lives and family (especially of women and children's) that divorce caused, and decided "no thanks". The more devout no doubt worried that certain temptations would arise once a man made a marriage commitment to a woman, and that of itself added some temptations to sin that weren't there before marriage. The difference between then and now is that Jewish men and women of that day generally didn't just co-habitate as an alternative; the shame would have been too great. Today, the number of unmarried couples living together is rising at an alarming rate and Western society doesn't even blink at it. Since marriage has moved from the religious realm to the secular and governmental realm, then it has become mostly a financial issue. Young couples don't want their finances to be affected since in the Western world it is finances that is at the heart of divorce details (along with the disposition of the offspring). That is, for many of them in the modern era it is better to just live together, keep the finances separate, and when one has decided to move on to greener pastures, it's only a matter of hiring a moving truck. No commitment, no further damage done. There is no thought of God's commands and laws on the subject.

Paul had things to say about marriage as well, with one eye towards the specter of divorce. In 1st Corinthians 7 we read this.

READ 1CORINTHIANS 7:1 - 16

Since I'm not teaching what Paul said but rather what Matthew and Mark said, we won't go into every detail of Paul's narrative. I had us read this in order to notice how complex the matter of marriage and divorce had become later in the 1st century. Believing in, and following, Yeshua in some ways added to the complications; yet if we listen to what Yeshua said in Matthew 19 it should only simplify. The matter of marriage for a Believer can be so fraught with dangers of sinning that Paul outright says that he wishes every Believing male would be like him (choosing not to marry). Of course that also assumes celibacy, which our modern Western cultural says is puritanical if not stupid.

OK. I want to embellish a little on this teaching about marriage, divorce, and monogamy. The expansive subject of marriage, divorce, monogamy, and even celibacy loomed large in the 1st century and perhaps even larger now. To understand the biblical view and Yeshua's view of it, we need to understand what all of this meant to the Jews of the 1st century because the context in which it was taught is how we need to take it. There were numerous viewpoints about these topics in the 1st century. I have already mentioned the Pharisees, Hillel and Shammai and their views but there were others as well such as that of the Essenes, who, as near as we can tell from the Dead Sea Scroll documents, allowed no divorce for any reason. So in a kind of Paul-like view (or maybe Paul had adopted the Essene view) male Essenes usually shunned marriage for the sake of not sinning, although marriage was by no means outlawed by the Essenes.

It's so important to realize that the majority of marriages in Jewish society then were what we might call arranged marriages, and that was because the girl was usually quite young when it happened. Being only 12 or 13 it was not unusual for a girl to be betrothed to a man she likely didn't even know, at her father's decision. Partly this is because money was involved, and at other times one party in the arrangement might have held a higher social status that would have allowed the more common family to be elevated into it, if such a marriage could be arranged. A girl (a maiden, or more common in the Bible vernacular, a virgin) was transferred from being under the authority of her father immediately to the authority of her husband. Unless the girl was a much more advanced age, she had no choice in the matter.

Despite what can seem to us as harsh rules for marriage and divorce, it was actually mostly for the benefit of the woman. Not until later in time could a woman divorce a man; it was a one-way street and that's why we see the divorce laws worded the way they were. It was not if a man displeased a woman that there was grounds for divorce, it was only if a woman displeased a man. And what amounted to unfaithfulness in a marriage was quite different for a woman than a man. Unfaithfulness was expanded for a woman to mean that perhaps she wasn't a good enough housekeeper to please her husband. Or maybe she was unable to have children. Or she had some disability that didn't enable her to do the work or marital duties expected of a wife. None of this applied to a man. If he was unable to, or unwilling to, perform his marital duties or support the family then the wife and children suffered with no recourse. If he was abusive, she couldn't leave him. So the divorce laws were meant to help with this

situation. The requirement of the Law for a husband to give his wife a **get** (a divorce document) freed her from the control and authority of her husband. Often this meant giving her the ability to return to her father's household and authority. In only the rarest of cases could a woman divorce her husband. Divorce was entirely in the hands of the male. And as much as not, the underlying reason that women were stuck in a bad marriage was because in the biblical era an unmarried adult woman not living under her father's roof was likely to be in poverty because men held down almost all the paying jobs. Divorce could mean real deprivation for the female.

It is interesting to me how Yeshua clearly veers off from divorce and into the issue of polygamy versus monogamy. While that isn't all that apparent to us, it would have been to His Jewish listeners. While we really don't have any strong evidence one way or the other into how widespread the practice of polygamy was in His day, the evidence is clear that it existed in Jewish society but probably not outside the Holy Land. This is because Roman Law generally prohibited it in their Empire, although they made many exceptions for the former Israelite territories and the Jewish people. It might surprise some Believers, but the Law of Moses actually allowed polygamy although it didn't advocate for it.

Exodus chapter 21 of the Torah presents a series of rulings given by God through Moses. In verse 10 we read:

10 If he marries another wife, he is not to reduce her food, clothing or marital rights.

So the thought here is a protection for the woman who becomes a man's second wife; she's not to be provided for less than his first wife. In Deuteronomy we read:

CJB Deuteronomy 21:15-17 ¹⁵ "If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and unloved wives have borne him children, and if the firstborn son is the child of the unloved wife; ¹⁶ then, when it comes time for him to pass his inheritance on to his sons, he may not give the inheritance due the firstborn to the son of the loved wife in place of the son of the unloved one, who is in fact the firstborn. ¹⁷ No, he must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the unloved wife by giving him a double portion of everything he owns, for he is the firstfruits of his manhood, and the right of the firstborn is his.

So while this passage is structured around a man having 2 wives (one whom he's happy with the other that he's not), the issue is what about the children each wife has borne? And what about the firstborn (which were always males) when conditions change, such as death or divorce? This matter is as critical for the well-being of the wives as it is for the sons and the other children because if a wife was either widowed or divorced, her only hope of a decent life lay in the existence of a son to care for her. My point is that polygamy was not only tolerated it was planned for. Yet do not think that anywhere in the Torah is polygamy recommended. Rather it is something that God knew would continue to exist and so commanded what must be done to protect the women and the children.

What Bible student doesn't know that the forefather of the entire Hebrew race, Abraham, had not only multiple wives but also concubines as did his son Isaac and grandson Jacob after him. King David had multiple wives and yet he was so very dear to God's heart. So what we must be careful to do with such issues as marriage, divorce, and polygamy versus monogamy is to separate God's ideal will from what God in His mercy makes provision for, for the fallen and perverted human race. In fact, in the Old Testament polygamy most often is related to the first wife not being able to bear children and even when that's not the case we read of trouble after trouble, headache after headache that comes from it... especially from the offspring... with the consequences often bleeding into future generations.

When we arrive to the 1st century, polygamy has mostly died out among the Jews partly due to the Roman influence but also because of the sheer financial burden of it. Most men simply couldn't afford more than one wife. It is very interesting that information found within the Dead Sea Scrolls sheds light on this matter of polygamy during Jesus's day. We learn from it that the Essenes firmly rejected polygamy. But what is interesting is what they had to say about what the Pharisees thought about polygamy. Keep in mind that the Essenes and the Pharisees were, at the least, rivals. Their doctrines were very different because while the Essenes' goal was to shuck off the centuries of manmade traditions that now ruled the Jewish faith, and in-so-doing return to something more pure and much closer to the Law of Moses, the Pharisees embraced those manmade traditions (and seemed to make more of them nearly daily), taking them farther and farther away from the Law of Moses. I want to quote this Dead Sea Scrolls passage to you because it is within this context that it helps us to understand why Yeshua took the topic of divorce that the Pharisees confronted Him with, and

essentially moved it towards an argument for monogamous marriage.

It seems that in the so-called Damascus Documents (which are part of the Dead Sea Scrolls) the Essenes have two articles of denunciation for the Pharisee-allowed practice of polygamy, something the Essenes saw as evil and definite sexual immorality. Here is one them (this is a quote from that ancient document).

"They (the Pharisees) are caught by two snares. By sexual sin, namely taking two wives in their lives, while the foundation of Creation is male and female He created them. And those who entered Noah's Ark went in two by two into the Ark. And of the Prince it is written let him not multiply wives for himself. And David did not read the sealed book of the Torah, which was in the Ark of the Covenant, for it was not opened in Israel until the day of the death of Eleazar and Joshua and the Elders. For their successors worship the Ashtoreth, and that which was revealed was hidden until Zadok arose, so David's works were accepted, and God forgave him for them." CD 4:20 - 5:6.

We could spend much time with this passage, but the point is that the Essenes saw that the Pharisees (who are the "they" in this passage) were caught in a snare of their own making (their traditions that accepted polygamy). This snare, a stumbling block, was the sex sin of allowing a man to have 2 wives and, just as Jesus did in Matthew 19, the Essenes argued their point beginning with the act of Creation (a time before the Law of Moses came into being) when God created 2 people: a man and a woman. I can't go by without commenting how the Essenes also found a way to make the polygamist King David innocent on the grounds that the sealed book (taken to mean Deuteronomy) wasn't available to him because it was inside the Ark of the Covenant, which he dare not to open, so he was ignorant of God's ideal of a man having only 1 wife.

The other article of denunciation against polygamy itself (less so directed against the Pharisees) comes from their interpretation and midrash of Leviticus 18:18. This same argument against polygamy is used in another of the Dead Sea Scrolls documents called the Temple Scroll. It goes like this:

CJB Leviticus 18:18 ¹⁸ You are not to take a woman to be a rival with her sister and have sexual relations with her while her sister is still alive.

The Essenes interpreted this differently. The Hebrew word used for sister

is ***achoth***. However it is now known that in the biblical Hebrew of that day that ***achoth*** could be used for meaning a sister or it could mean "other" or "another" of the female gender. The word sister was often used as meaning a fellow female Israelite (just like Christians will sometimes refer to a female Believer as a sister, when in fact no familial relationship is intended).

So, perhaps a better reading of Leviticus 18:18 (that really makes the most sense) is how the Essenes took it. Please listen carefully.

"And he shall not take another wife, for she alone will be with him all the days of her life".

What I am telling you is not my opinion but rather it is how the writers of both the Damascus Document and the Temple Scroll from Christ's day (and some decades before) took Leviticus 18:18 to mean: it was, for them, a decisive argument in favor of monogamy. In any case this must be taken as the background in Matthew to explain why Yeshua sort of oddly devolved into the issue of marital monogamy since that is not what He was asked about. Rather it was that He was talking to religious authorities (Pharisees) who accepted polygamy as Godly and He wanted to use this opportunity to straighten them out. Christ was a pragmatist; not an idealist. He dealt with the real issues of His time; not a series of hypothetical ones. It's when we lift Him out of that pragmatic approach, and out of His Jewishness, that Christian teachers regularly spiritualize what He says and so His teachings become a maze of allegorical sermons with different outcomes.

We're not quite finished with the issues of marriage, divorce, celibacy, and monogamy yet, so that is what we'll continue with next week.