

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 66, Chapter 19 Continued

Marriage, divorce, polygamy versus monogamy, and celibacy... these were all important issues in Yeshua's time, and remain so in the modern era. While polygamy in the Western developed world is found only in smallish and offbeat remnants of our societies and so is rarely even a topic of discussion in the Church or within secular governments, in the 1st century, it was still a somewhat unsettled part of the marriage discussion among Jews. As I showed you last week, the Pharisees generally allowed for polygamy even though its practice only occurred sporadically within a small fraction of the Jewish population and interestingly, was something nearly exclusive to the Holy Land Jews; there is no evidence that it was practiced in the Jewish Diaspora, no doubt because of the heavy-handed Roman influence that was anti-polygamy.

Therefore in the Gospel of Matthew we find Yeshua planting (or perhaps re-planting) a stake in the ground for monogamy as God's marriage standard. He did this when in verse 3 of Matthew chapter 19, some Pharisees (who accepted polygamy) asked Him a question about divorce. The question was **not** if divorce was legal or acceptable to God (and since it was the Pharisees asking the question they were thinking in terms of Jewish Law, **Halakhah**), but rather the question revolved around what the proper grounds for divorce are. Christ answers by taking the tact that the issue was settled at Creation (long before there was such a thing as a Hebrew race, a Law of Moses, or **Halakhah**), at the moment when God formed the first man and first woman as the first couple. He combined with that God's command in the Genesis account that a man and a woman are to leave their parents, become one flesh, and remain that way their entire lives. It is not directly said, but Jesus's instruction clearly imputes monogamy among humans since it is illogical that 1 male and 2 or more females

could unite and become a single flesh. That is, in order to satisfy the command to become one flesh would mean that the not only the male becomes one flesh with 2 (or more) women, but also that the 2 (or more) women would become one flesh with one another. From a God-standpoint of marriage being a uniting of male and female that creates one flesh, such a polygamous marriage is an oxymoron. Therefore the practice of polygamy is wrong, and probably can't even be technically thought of as true and pure marriage, even though throughout history among the Hebrews it is clear that God tolerated it, just as He tolerated divorce.

Although I made this point last week, it is too important to not address again for God's people of the 21st century. There was no such thing as gay marriage within Jewish society in Yeshua's era. There were in ancient times some rare ritualistic and informal same-sex unions that occurred, usually privately and hidden, and always with perverted and demented people such as Nero who thought themselves as gods or demigods who didn't have to play within the normal bounds of humanity. But these so-called marriages did not occur within the religious realm so far as my research has shown. Such a thing wasn't contemplated within any societal norm because marriage was something that was handled exclusively in the religious realm and because perhaps the primary purpose of marriage was to produce offspring both for the purpose of the family economy and to carry on the family name. So when we look at the Jewish faith, of course, the uniting of 2 men or 2 women in marriage wasn't anywhere on their radar nor do we ever read of it in the Bible or even extra-biblical Jewish documents. Such a publicly recognized concept as a legitimized gay marriage is only a late 20th century phenomena, and even that is generally only in the bubble of Western culture. So to make myself clear: God teaches in His Word, Jesus affirms, and Seed of Abraham Ministries obeys and firmly advocates, that marriage is an institution of a union between 1 man and 1 woman.

Of course, such a thing as gay marriage did not originate within the Church; it came about because civil governments have intervened and taken marriage out of its formerly exclusive religious realm and put it into the secular civil law realm. In other words, in the West marriage was stolen away and put into the political sphere of control and thus politicians can now define and redefine marriage at their will and for their own political benefit.

In response to what all Believers ought to see as an outrage, inexplicably some Christian denominations have actually taken it upon themselves to accept and embrace the civil and political concept of gay marriage, retool the holy concept of

marriage, add to it an aura of heavenly legitimacy, and bring it into the body of Christ as acceptable (even admirable). Large denominations such as the Presbyterians and the Methodists have adopted gay marriage (these are not the only ones to do so). It has resulted in that part of those denominations (and others) having to split off from the main body, further fracturing an already fragmented Christian Church, to maintain the sanctity of marriage as the God ordained platform of 1 man united with 1 woman. Make no mistake: marriage has become Satan's playground in a way no Jew could have imagined in Christ's era. Even though it was also Satan's playground then, it expressed itself in different ways such as through rampant divorce and the acceptance of polygamy (even though as with gay marriage today, polygamy only happened infrequently in Jewish society as compared to the norm of monogamy).

Now we get to the matter of divorce. Before we talk about that, let's re-read a portion of Matthew 19.

RE-READ MATTHEW 19:1 - 12

Christ doesn't disagree with the Pharisees that divorce is legal both from a biblical and a Jewish Tradition standpoint and that a bill of divorce to protect the woman and the children is to be part of the sad procedure. However, Yeshua explains that because of how it was "at the beginning" between a man and a woman (meaning at Creation) then there is only one acceptable grounds for a divorce: marital unfaithfulness. In the Greek manuscripts the word for this kind of unfaithfulness is ***porneia***, and it literally means illicit sexual activity outside the sanctity of the marriage union. Interestingly the word was also used as a metaphor within the Jewish community for worshipping idols because to worship idols is to be unfaithful in the union between the Hebrew people and God. However we find that some Hebrew religious leaders early on in Hebrew and Israelite history, redefined this marital unfaithfulness to extend beyond only actual illicit sexual activity (adultery) and into the realm of a woman not pleasing her husband in some manner, and the source of this displeasure was left up to the husband. Therefore in 1st century (and earlier) Jewish society, divorce could only be enacted by the husband and for nearly any reason that he claimed. This was more or less the way the Pharisees, and therefore the Synagogue, taught about divorce. Thus divorce had become quite the frivolous thing in parts of Jewish society. It was thought that fornication outside of marriage was the lesser sin than adultery, so often it was merely a man divorcing his wife only briefly in order to have a fling with another woman, only to remarry the wife he had divorced in a

few weeks. So as we ponder all that Christ had to say to His 12 Jewish disciples about marriage, divorce, and monogamy, keep this background in mind.

This is one of those Bible passages that I spoke about last week in which there is disagreement between Matthew and Mark. In Mark 10 we read:

^{CJB} **Mark 10:12** *and if a wife divorces her husband and marries another man, she too commits adultery."*

So here Mark speaks of a wife initiating a divorce. A wife divorcing her husband was simply not part of normal Jewish culture in the 1st century. I suspect that we find such a concept in Mark because his Gospel was written for a gentile audience while Matthew's Gospel was intended for a Jewish audience. Therefore Matthew sets the scene as Yeshua attempting to reset the guidelines for divorce to what was God-ordained (as He put it) "from the beginning"... at the time of Creation. This would have not only upset the Pharisees (although we don't read of any response from them) it had a pretty unnerving effect on the 12 disciples. So here's 2 things to take from this: first, I have been describing the context and cultural backdrop from which the question of divorce was asked of Yeshua, and therefore the context of His response. Second, no matter how we in the 21st century might attempt to turn it to our favor, sexual infidelity... adultery... is the ONLY acceptable grounds for divorce according to Christ. It is true that Paul in 1Corinthians 7 adds as a second legitimate reason for divorce as abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Therefore it is a great sin to divorce for any other reason. That said, forgiveness and restoration are possible for those who do divorce for other reasons... at least for those who trust in Christ and sincerely repent.

So how about the woman that divorces her husband due to his violent physical abuse? Nothing like this is contemplated in the Bible, so what I'm about to tell you is only my opinion and not a command of God. We live in fallen, ever-darkening world. Violent domestic abuse ought not to exist... but it does. In God's Word we find that the value of life trumps nearly everything. Even in the Sabbath observance commandment we find in both Old and New Testaments examples of a person working to save a life on the Sabbath as the right thing to do... even the life of an animal. Thus for me, if a wife is being violently abused and has to leave her husband to literally save her own life and very likely that of her children as well, then it is warranted. I've heard too many stories of Christian women staying with their physically abusive husbands thinking it is their duty in order to please

God, and even of some Pastors counseling wives to remain in physically abusive marriages otherwise they become great sinners.

Certainly God hates divorce no matter the cause. But that doesn't mean He hates the divorcee. He laid down rules to deal with the very thing He hates, and this because He better than anyone understands humanity's fallen nature and the terrible consequences it produces. So out of His great mercy, under very narrow circumstances, He permits a way out. The bigger problem lies in that as with the Pharisaical Traditions, almost any kind of unhappiness between spouses became the grounds for divorce. Today the term to make divorce easy is irreconcilable differences. I'll say it loud and clear: irreconcilable differences...whatever those differences might be... may be a civil legal reason acceptable to secular society but it is not a fine reason for Believers to divorce. With that said, we have a much more complex society today that in no way operates as it was in biblical times. The way our family economies work is very different, and the way people are cared for is very different. This doesn't excuse the sin of divorce outside of the reason Christ gave and perhaps the one that Paul gave. And yet divorce is not, and does not have to be, the end of our relationship with God. Let's move on to celibacy and singleness.

Christ's disciples respond to his teaching on divorce and monogamy in verse 10 by essentially saying that to play within those rules makes marriage too hard, because it makes divorce too hard. The disciples' response frankly exposes them as the spiritual infants that they remain to be, but also it highlights the attitude about marriage and divorce of the male segment of Jewish society in general. The disciples completely contort Yeshua's instruction to make it as though His exhortation of monogamy is a promotion of singleness and celibacy. Because every one of the disciples is a product of the Synagogue (and therefore of the Traditions of the Pharisees) then they hold to a view that (as a result of Yeshua's new teaching) that a lifetime of commitment to only 1 woman is more trouble than it's worth, and it opens oneself up to sinning in more serious ways, than if they didn't marry at all. To that Jesus responds in a rather understanding way: "Not everyone grasps this teaching, only those for whom it is meant". I suspect He displays an acceptance to the disciples' attitude on marriage versus singleness because He Himself has chosen to remain unmarried and celibate. But we must take His meaning in light of what comes next when He talks about reasons that men may indeed rightly choose to remain single (men had as much responsibility to be fruitful and multiply as did women). And He speaks about this subject using the term "Eunuch" in 3 different cases (this is somewhat hidden in the CJB). The

Greek word for the English "Eunuch" is **eunouchos**. It means castrated males or abstinence (celibacy) by choice. The fundamental sense of the word is that for whatever reason a male isn't able to (or chooses not to) have sexual intimacy with a wife, and it also includes the sense that he cannot or will not help to produce children. The KJV has it translated the most literally.

^{KJV} **Matthew 19:12** *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.*

We find in this difficult verse 3 types of Eunuchs, each meaning well understood in 1st-century Jewish society.

The first type of Eunuch is in Hebrew **seris hamma**, which in the literal sense is Eunuch of the sun. What it means as a phrase is, from the first seeing of the sun. In other words, since birth. So this means that something is either wrong with the male's reproductive system that was thought to have been from birth, going so far as to not even having been born with the proper genitalia. And while in modern times very often such medical issues can be resolved, in those days it couldn't.

The second type of Eunuch is in Hebrew **seris adam**. It literally means Eunuch of man. In other words, this is a male who has been castrated by another male. This type could include a male that had a medical issue occur later in life or even is a case of having his genitals damaged in an accident or in battle such that reproduction was no longer possible.

The third type of Eunuch does not have a specific Hebrew word or phrase for it (at least not one I know about), but rather it is only described. It is a man who has a fully functional reproduction system and normal desires. Yet for religious reasons chooses to remain celibate and therefore to not marry. In the case of Believers that Christ is talking about they, like He, are doing it for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let me be clear: this is NOT about being extra pure. It is about making a personal sacrifice in order to be devoted, full time, to do a work or ministry in which it would be unfair to a wife. Perhaps it involves being permanently itinerant, or has a severe element of danger, or is going to be so time consuming that the proper demands of marriage and family cannot be met.

Yet these men are so committed to something greater than their own normal and healthy personal needs and desires that they are willing to forego them that they might obtain a different kind of joy from serving God and His Kingdom.

What Christ is saying (I'll use Christian-eze) is that such a decision must be a special divine calling. This is those that He says "can grasp this". The word "grasp" sort of misses the point. A better English word is to "accept" it in the sense of being prepared by the Holy Spirit to accept and act on behalf of the Kingdom as a calling and purpose in life, by choosing to be single for the reason of any of these 3 types of Eunuchs. So from the viewpoint of the disciples' rather poor response to Yeshua's teaching on marriage and divorce as a devotion to 1 woman for a lifetime, and their reply that it is easier to remain single, Yeshua is saying **no** to that thought. In fact, He is saying that to be like Him...single by choice, like that 3rd type of Eunuch... is the harder choice than marital fidelity to one woman. Celibacy and singleness is a good choice, but in no way is it somehow better than a choice of marriage. It is a choice only for some and must be based on a divine calling; few men ought to make it. And Paul tells us why few men are mentally and emotionally equipped to make that choice and stick with it.

^{CJB} **1 Corinthians 7:7-9** ⁷ *Actually, I wish everyone were like me; but each has his own gift from God, one this, another that.* ⁸ *Now to the single people and the widows I say that it is fine if they remain unmarried like me;* ⁹ *but if they can't exercise self-control, they should get married; because it is better to get married than to keep burning with sexual desire.*

So, yes; choosing to remain single brings with it its own set of challenges and temptations that include a possibility of committing a sex sin of a different nature than the kind that marriage brings with it. Bottom line: marriage and singleness are equally valid and good in God's eyes. It's a personal choice.

Verse 13 shifts gears. Some children were brought to Yeshua so that He might lay hands on them and pray over them. What this is really getting at in a round-about way is to lay hands on them and to pronounce a blessing over them. But the 12 Disciples are still off on a wrong track and almost seem to have forgotten what their Master has just taught them about showing respect for little children, their value to God, even displaying the kind of humility that small children display. So when the children come, the disciples try to shoo them away. Christ again rebukes them for it. Let's re-read the remainder of Matthew 19.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 19:13 - end

Before we get too tough on the 12 Disciples, remember that these were men. Especially in this era children were the responsibility of women. Men usually didn't have much to do with children until they neared the age of adulthood (13 years old). If the Disciples had been women, this lesson about children would never have had to have been taught, since women tend to be natural nurturers of children. For the Disciples the children didn't even belong around them and Jesus as they discussed important adult matters. But Christ challenged their view with something that wasn't the norm for the Middle East.

It is interesting to me that Mark characterizes the ritual of Christ laying hands on the children and blessing them as:

CJB Mark 10:13 ¹³ *People were bringing children to him so that he might touch them, but the talmidim rebuked those people.*

"That He might touch them" tells me that Mark didn't really understand this Jewish ritual Tradition because obviously, the issue is not that people wanted Jesus to merely touch their children, it's that He would bless them in the customary Jewish way.

Now, interestingly enough, verses 13 and 14 have been used by Catholic and other Christian denominations as one of the basis for infant baptism. I find that a rather major stretch, as this passage not only has nothing to do with immersion, it also doesn't have anything to do with infants.

So what did Christ mean in verse 14 when He said that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these, referring to these children? Mark adds:

CJB Mark 10:15 *Yes! I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will not enter it!*

This has puzzled many Bible scholars. My opinion is that this refers back to Chapter 18 about the disciples' argument over who is greatest in the Kingdom, and then Jesus used some little children to teach and answer the disciples' question. The point is this: in the Kingdom, earthly ways are going to be reversed. In the Kingdom, the greatest will be the least, and the least the greatest. The greatest and least are referring to social status usually attained

through material wealth or family name since wealth and family name were perhaps the primary determiners of status. Since little children held the least status, and yet they are humble, they make for a good metaphor to explain not just who gets into the Kingdom of Heaven but also by what standard does one attain Kingdom societal status. Those who will hold the greatest social status in the Kingdom of Heaven will be the most humble. Those with the least social status in the Kingdom will be the least humble. Money and family name simply doesn't matter. This lesson about status reversal continues with the story of the rich man wanting eternal life.

Verse 16 begins with the words: "A man approached Yeshua...". We don't learn until later that this was a rich man so he held great social status. It is good to remember that wealth, status, and the Kingdom of Heaven were central themes to the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore what happens concerning the rich man is an actual case example of a remark from Yeshua that He taught during that Sermon, which we find in Matthew chapter 6.

^{CJB} **Matthew 6:24** *No one can be slave to two masters; for he will either hate the first and love the second, or scorn the second and be loyal to the first. You can't be a slave to both God and money.*

Further, we cannot help but see that Jesus goes on to use the 10 Commandments (which is the preamble to the Law of Moses) as a way to continue highlighting the central importance and relevance of the Torah and our obedience to it. And, as a good observant Jew, the rich man wanted to know what good thing (probably meaning good deed, or in Hebrew what *mitzvah*) that he ought to do to get eternal life. I find it interesting not so much as the query itself about what particular thing should he do, but rather with the goal of it in his mind: attaining eternal life. We simply don't find the words "eternal life" in the *Tanakh*, the Old Testament. The only place we find that thought is in the New Testament. As a matter of fact, the first time we hear of it is in the previous chapter of Matthew. And since there was no New Testament yet, how are we to take what the rich man was thinking when he said he seeks eternal life by doing some kind of deed or work?

Therefore whoever this fellow was, he had to have been part of the crowd over in the Galilee who heard Jesus use the term "eternal life" that we find in Matthew 18:8. This man was so taken by Christ's teaching that he then followed Jesus to the border of Judea.

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:8** *"So if your hand or foot becomes a snare for you, cut it off and throw it away! Better that you should be maimed or crippled and obtain eternal life than keep both hands or both feet and be thrown into everlasting fire!"*

I imagine that the rich man didn't really know what eternal life meant because those words were new with Yeshua; but it sure sounded like something anyone would want. Does eternal life mean that a person lives forever in their current bodies and therefore in their current social status? Or is it that some essence of themselves that lives forever? Is it reincarnation? Where do you live eternally? It was common in that era (less so among Jews) to be buried with some of their wealth in hopes of aiding in having a pleasant afterlife. Of course, whether there even **was** an afterlife was an unsettled matter and provided a never-ending debate topic among the Jewish intellectuals. Jesus threw everyone a curveball with this eternal life thing, and I doubt anyone knew what He meant by it. Since for Jesus's Jewish listeners the Kingdom of Heaven was thought of as a concrete, tangible earthly Kingdom that Jews would live in... mainly as a restored and exalted Israel... I have no doubt that this young man figured he'd just be taking his wealth and social advantages with him. So for him the issue was, what is the good thing he needed to perform for access to the Kingdom so that he could continue his wealthy life forever?

Although in the CJB the rich man walks up to Yeshua and calls Him Rabbi, in other Bible versions it is Teacher. Either way, the point is that this rich man sees Christ as a very wise Teacher, but not a Savior. Not as a Messiah. Yeshua sort of chastises the man when He says: "Why are you asking me about good... there is only One that is good". I can't imagine that Jesus didn't understand the intent of the man's question. The obvious subject is good deeds, not the source of goodness (which Yeshua says is God). So various scholars have various ideas about what Christ was getting at with that remark. For me, it's a head-scratcher and I really don't want to speculate because I'm not sure how it adds to the teaching. What comes next, however, throws the mother of all monkey wrenches into what is a nearly universal Church doctrine. Yeshua says if you want to obtain eternal life, then obey the commandments (obviously He means the 10 commandments). Whoa! Christian doctrine is that we pray the sinners prayer and then go live our lives without regard to anything that comes before the New Testament. Since the rich man knows that there are many commandments (not just the 10 Commandments), He asks the rather absurd question "which ones?" as though only some of the commandments really mattered. Yeshua comes back

with don't murder or commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie and he should honor his parents.

I need to pause to tell you something that is a pet peeve of mine to the point of distraction because I find the same or similar comments in so many Christian commentaries on this passage. I'll quote to you what Ben Witherington III said as representative of the concept so many other commentators also profess.

"Jesus lists some of the commandments... prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, and false testimony, and on the positive side honoring one's parents and loving one's neighbor as oneself. It is perhaps most significant what He does not list....namely the Sabbath commandment. This deliberate omission may reflect Jesus's view that... keeping a particular day as the Sabbath was no longer obligatory..."

Long ago I would have found such a thought as bizarre and certainly not widespread; but it is all too common among academic Christian commentators. It simply doesn't matter what the New Testament says, their conclusion is that Jesus abolished the Torah and the Law of Moses and everything else prior to the New Testament along with it... including of course the dreaded Sabbath...because that is 1800 year old gentile Roman Church doctrine. The reflection of deep-seated Christian traditions that are so steeped in anti-Semitism that the typical academic or layperson is blinded to their own prejudice, causes these otherwise intelligent people to at times say the most outlandish, forehead-slapping, things.

So in other words, if Christ didn't utter every single commandment in the Torah to the rich man, then He must have intended to communicate that the Shabbat was abolished? Jesus also didn't say to the rich man the commandment that we are not to worship other gods. So I suppose following Professor Witherington's logic that can only mean that Yeshua just gave His approval for us worshipping other gods. He also didn't quote God's command that we are not to make graven images nor to take God's name in vain. Good news! Jesus says that now we can swear like a sailor and make all the little wooden idols we want to! What do you see that is the common theme behind the commandments Yeshua listed? It is that these all involve human to human relationships (loving your neighbor), sometimes called The Second Tablet, and not human to God relationships, sometimes called The First Tablet. These are the commandments that are about loving our fellow man. The Sabbath is about our relationship with God. The rich

man asked about good deeds, so Yeshua responded with a list of good deeds taken directly from the Torah and the Law of Moses.

The rich man replies that he already obeys those commandments (at least he must think that he does). So where might he fall short (of doing enough to obtain eternal life), he asks? Yeshua says if he is really serious then the rich man should sell all his wealth and distribute it among the poor people. It is an exchange of riches on earth for riches in Heaven. After that, the rich man should follow Christ. But when the rich man heard this he became sad, turned, and walked away. To best understand what happened here we must keep in mind that the issue revolved around good deeds as the key to eternal life (whatever eternal life meant to the rich man). Good deeds and obeying the Law of Moses were seen as the measurements of a person's righteousness. And since doing good deeds was the standard that the rich man was assuming was needed for membership in the Kingdom, then Yeshua says essentially that if the man wanted to enter by that means and standard, then he had to be perfect in those good deeds by divesting himself of all earthly treasure and distributing it to the poor; something the rich man was not prepared to do

We'll finish up this teaching and the remainder of chapter 19 next time, and begin chapter 20.