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Matthew 19:1 - 19:9



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg examines the issue of divorce and remarriage based on Matthew 19:1-9, where Jesus is questioned by the Pharisees. Gregg explains the different viewpoints of two rabbis concerning the grounds for divorce and highlights Jesus' response, which emphasized God's original intention for marriage as a lifelong union. Gregg emphasizes the concept of "hardness of heart" as the reason for divorce and notes that Jesus allowed for adultery and fornication as valid grounds for divorce but not for remarriage if the first marriage remained intact.

Transcript

Let's turn now to Matthew 19, where we will find the very controversial issue of divorce and remarriage addressed by Jesus Christ in the context of a question that was asked to him by the religious leaders of his day. In Matthew 19, verse 1, it says, Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that he departed from Galilee, and he came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed him, and he healed them there.

The Pharisees also came to him, testing him, and saying to him, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason? And he answered and said to them, Have you not read that he who made them at the beginning made them male and female? And said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to him, Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away? He said to them, Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted 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, and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery. Now we'll stop right there. That's verses 1 through 9 of Matthew 19.

We read in the opening verses simply that Jesus departed from Galilee and came to the

region of Judea beyond the Jordan, and therefore he was in a different region which was much more heavily controlled by the religious establishment. In Galilee, up in the north of the country, there were of course Pharisees and so forth. Many of them had come from Judea to spy on him and to find fault with him, but Galilee was a much more liberated area from the bondage of the control of the religious establishment down in Judea.

And when Jesus came down into the turf, as it were, of the Pharisees, they converged upon him, and we are told that they asked a question testing him. Now, if they are testing him, it must be that there was some way he could pass or fail the test in their judgment. What was the test? The question they asked is, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason? Now, the question, for those who understand Judaism of the time of Christ, was one of asking Jesus to take sides between two rival denominations, as it were, among the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were of two different denominations. They followed the traditions of the rabbis, but the rabbis did not always speak with one voice on certain issues. And in the generation before this, there had been two very notable rabbis who had disciples of their own, and these men represented different camps and different positions on a number of issues.

One of them was Rabbi Hillel, and he was a somewhat liberal rabbi who did not restrict behavior as much as his rival Shammai. Shammai was a very strict, I guess we'd say legalistic kind of a rabbi who did not interpret vague laws in a way that was loose in any way. You know, if the scripture said you should not do any labor on the Sabbath, but did not say what constitutes labor, Shammai was the one who would be most likely to restrict more activities on the Sabbath than Hillel would, who would be inclined to interpret the word labor a little more freely to allow some forms of activity and not constitute labor or violation of the Sabbath.

Likewise, on the issue of divorce and remarriage, Hillel and Shammai had had different opinions from each other. And therefore, their disciples, their followers, had different opinions from each other, and there were two camps on this matter. Shammai had taught that a man can only divorce his wife if he finds her to be sexually immoral.

That is, if she is not faithful and is sexually a violator of the marriage covenant. Hillel was a little more, considerably more liberal. Hillel said, well, no, a person can divorce his wife for anything he finds intolerable in her.

You see, they were both commenting on the same Old Testament passage, which was Deuteronomy chapter 24, which is, by the way, the only passage in the Old Testament really about divorce, and that is the only law governing divorce in the Old Testament. And in Deuteronomy chapter 24, Moses had said that if a man marries a woman and finds some uncleanness in her, and this business of uncleanness is very unspecified, so

it's not clear exactly what is meant by it, he says the man can give her a writing of divorcement, and she can go and become another man's wife. However, if her second husband dies or gives her a writing of divorcement, she cannot go back to her first husband.

This is what the legislation of Deuteronomy taught. But notably, the legislation of Deuteronomy did not specify what uncleanness is. How could a man know whether he was permitted to divorce his wife if he was not certain what was meant by the uncleanness that a man finds in his wife that entitles him to divorce her? Well, again, Shammai, the rabbi, said that this uncleanness could only be if she was an adulteress, or if she had committed fornication perhaps before the marriage and had not disclosed this to the husband.

In other words, sexual impurity on her part was the only kind of uncleanness that would allow a man to divorce his wife. But Hillel believed that uncleanness might be any kind of offensive thing, and he went so far as to suggest even if the wife had become old and ugly, and was no longer pleasing to her husband in her appearance, or if she was a nag, and therefore an unpleasant housemate, or if she was a poor cook and burned the food. These were some of the things that Hillel allowed a man to divorce his wife for.

In fact, essentially, Hillel's teaching allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason he wanted to, since a man would not even think about divorcing his wife unless he found something unpleasant about her, and therefore whatever it was he found unpleasant about her was the uncleanness that allowed him to divorce her. And this really ended up being a teaching that you could divorce your wife for any reason you wanted. Now among the Pharisees there were those who held Hillel's position on this, and there were those who did not.

They held Shammai's position, and there was some dispute among them. When they came to Jesus, they were essentially putting Jesus in the position to decide between them. Whose view is correct, Hillel or Shammai? The way the question was worded, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason, states it in the terms of Hillel's position.

Hillel thought you could divorce your wife for just any reason you wanted to. Of course, Shammai didn't believe that, and so they asked Jesus his opinion. No doubt they hoped that by Jesus taking one side or the other, he would alienate himself from those who held whatever the contrary opinion was to what he said, since this was a volatile question.

And Jesus answered and said to them, Have you not read that he who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? Now he's quoting from Genesis chapter 2 and verse 24. When he says God made them male and female, he's quoting from Genesis 1.27, but when he says that God said, For this

reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, that's a quote from Genesis 2.24. It's the definitive Old Testament definition of marriage, that a man leaves his father and mother, and he goes and joins with a new solidarity. He is no longer now identified so much with his father's household as with his own, and with his wife, and he starts a new family, a new household.

And this is what constitutes marriage. Of course, there's more to it than just described there. Marriage is a lifelong covenantal relationship, at least that's what it's intended to be, and that's what Jesus makes clear here.

But the point here is Jesus quotes the very earliest statement in Scripture about what constitutes marriage, a man departing from one household and forming a new household with a wife, and being joined to her. And this new household becomes a unit as far as God is concerned, like the two have become one person, one flesh. And this is an act of God.

Now, the act of taking a wife is an act of a man, he does that. But the joining of the two into a union of oneness is something that goes beyond the ability of human beings to do. You know, you cannot make yourself one person with another person on your own.

But when people enter into a covenantal marriage relationship, according to the scriptural norms, God declares them to be one flesh. God is the one who re-identifies them and redefines them, not as two, but as one. Now, since God has done this, he's joined the two into one, Jesus says what God has joined together, do not let man separate.

That is, if God has said, okay, these two are no longer two, they're one. Then who has the authority to come out and say, no, now they are going to be two again? If God has declared them to be one, if he has joined them together, do not let man separate them. Now, this statement, of course, pits the authority of God against the authority of man.

If God is the one who authorized the union, who has the power to authorize disunion? Certainly no one has the authority of God in the matter, and therefore, Jesus makes it very clear that no human being has the right to dissolve what God has joined. Now, this strong statement has led many Christians to believe that Jesus opposed all divorce. In fact, it's as if Jesus had said that marriage can never be dissolved because God has joined it together and man has no right to put it asunder.

But it's one thing to say man does not have the right to do it. It's another thing to say man never does it. You know, I don't have the right to drive over the speed limit, but that doesn't mean I've never done it.

There are many things that people do that they don't have the right to do. There are

many things that people do that they shouldn't do because they have not been authorized or permitted to do it, but they do it nonetheless. Man is capable of doing far more things than he is allowed to do.

Now, when Jesus said, do not let any man put this asunder or separate this, which God has put together, Jesus is not saying that man is incapable of dissolving a marriage. He is saying that man is not permitted to do so. When he says, do not let any man do this, he is not saying it can't be done.

You know, if something cannot be done, you don't have to tell people not to let people do it. The fact that he says, do not let any man do this, means that it can be done, but it's not allowed to be done. If I said, do not let anyone walk on this carpet with muddy boots on, I am not saying that it is impossible for people to walk on this carpet, I am saying it is not permitted.

But you know what, I might give that command, and even God could give that command, and yet someone might walk into the room with muddy boots on and soil the carpet. Why? Because it is not impossible for man to do it, it is forbidden for man to do it. It was not impossible for Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it was forbidden for them to do it, but they did it anyway.

And therefore, when Jesus says, what God has joined together, do not let man separate, he is not saying that once God has made two people one, that man has no power to separate them. He simply says man has no authorization to separate them. Man does not have the authority of God.

And God who declared them one, should be honored, his authority should be honored above that of anyone else who may wish to make them something other than one. Now, what this tells us is very plainly, the marriage union can be dissolved, but it's not supposed to be. God forbids it to be, but he does not say it never can be.

There are certainly things that are implied could dissolve the marriage, but God forbids them. Now, what can dissolve a marriage? Well, we get to that a little later on in this segment. But the people, when Jesus said, let not man separate them, they responded to him, why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away? And he said to them, Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.

Oh, these are very interesting verses and very important. It's interesting that the question they asked him was not about marriage, but about divorce. They asked him, is it lawful to divorce your wife for any cause? And he answered, not by talking initially about divorce, but about marriage.

He says, haven't you heard what the Bible says about marriage? God joined them

together. Don't you understand the nature of marriage? That it is a divinely instituted thing? That God himself declares a marriage valid and God himself takes the two people who were separate entities and joins them into one in a marriage? Don't you understand what marriage is? Now, if you understand what marriage is, it should answer your question about divorce. If marriage is that God has joined them together and divorce is that man puts them asunder or divides them, separates them, then, you know, go figure.

It's quite obvious what the answer is. You should not undo what God has done. But they say, well, but we have cases in the Old Testament in the law which God himself gave that allows for divorce.

They said, why did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement? Now, it's interesting the verbs that are used by the people here and Jesus in his answer because he says, they said, why did Moses command to give a writing of divorce and put her away? Jesus said, Moses permitted you to do it. They say Moses commanded it and in a sense he did. If they were to divorce their wives, they were commanded to follow the procedure that Moses gave of giving a writing of divorcement.

But Jesus says, God never commanded you to divorce your wives. He permitted it because of the hardness of your hearts. But it was not so from the beginning.

Now, what Jesus is telling us here is that if we really want to know how to love God and fit into his purposes, we need to look not at what he permits but what he really wants. You see, God permitted, because of the hardness of human hearts, for people to divorce. But God never really wanted people to have hard hearts.

The hardness of heart is simply a situation that arose as the result of man's sinning and the fall taking place and therefore we have people with hard hearts. And taking that into consideration, because people have hard hearts, God has allowed, at times, people to be divorced. But he never really intended for people to have hard hearts or for them to get divorced.

And that's what Jesus says when he says it was not so from the beginning. What he means by that is, before the fall, before people sinned and introduced factors that God never wanted to see in the situation, namely sin and hardness of heart, there was never any intention or any reason why people would ever divorce. God made marriage with the intention that it should be lifelong and permanent and he never intended for any to be divorced from the beginning.

Now when sin came along and people became hard hearted and they became abusers and they became unfaithful to their wives and when they began to do other things that made, in some cases, marriage becomes an intolerable thing, then God permitted divorce because of this change in circumstances. But we should not ever dictate our own behavior on the basis of what God permits because of sin, but on the basis of what God

really wants. So many times Christians want to see what God will let you get away with.

You know, will God let me do this thing that seems shady? Well, if he didn't exactly forbid it, maybe I can get away with it. Well, the person who loves God isn't looking for ways to get away with stuff. The person who loves God is looking for ways to please God, to find out what really God wants and to do that.

If you love someone, you want to please them. And Jesus is saying, listen, God wants us to do what pleases him, of course, and he never intended for us to have hard hearts or to divorce our wives. Now, if you don't please him and you have a hard heart, then he sometimes will make provision for a marriage to come to an end.

He did that in the Old Testament, but he never really wanted it that way. And then Jesus clarifies the whole issue and obviously seems to come out of his mouth. He said, And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another commits adultery.

And whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery. Now, what Jesus is saying is Shammai is essentially right, that sexual immorality is the only grounds that could really make a divorce legitimate inside of God. Does that separate what God joined together? If Jesus is now allowing divorce on the basis of sexual immorality, is he saying now it's okay for man to put asunder what God has joined together? No.

What he is saying is this, Sexual immorality is a crime against the marriage that is so grievous that it itself constitutes a breaking up of the marriage vow. It is a smashing of the marriage vow to pieces. And because a person who is married and commits sexual immorality has in that act put asunder what God has joined together, the party who is innocent may divorce without being guilty of putting asunder that which has already been put asunder by the erring partner.

Now, no man or woman has the right to break the marriage vow by divorce or by adultery. But one party has done so, especially by adultery, Jesus said. If a person has committed adultery, he has put asunder the grounds for divorce.

And the person seeking the divorce is not guilty of putting asunder what God has joined together. The person who committed the act of adultery is the one who has put asunder that which God has joined together. The person who seeks the divorce on those grounds is merely formalizing the reality that has already been made a reality by the other party.

And the person who seeks divorce on those grounds is not sinning. You have no such grounds for divorce, and you simply are, you find somebody you like better than your present spouse, or you're very unhappy with your present spouse, or you can imagine a better life away from your present spouse, and your spouse has never committed adultery, but you divorce them anyway, and you marry another. Jesus says you're

committing adultery in that second marriage, which essentially means you are sinning against your first marriage, which is the grounds of adultery or fornication.

Then this first marriage is not intact, and remarriage is not adultery. A thing is only adultery if it violates an existing marriage. And Jesus sees a situation here where a man who does not have adultery on the part of his wife as the grounds for divorcing her, he divorces her anyway.

Well, the divorce is not legitimate. The woman has not committed adultery, and therefore God does not recognize the legitimacy of the divorce, and when the man marries again, he ends up violating an existing marriage covenant he has with his first wife, and therefore he commits adultery in the second marriage. And the same thing is true the other way around.

The woman who remarries in such a situation is also committing adultery because the first marriage has never really been validly dissolved. Not because marriages can't be validly dissolved, but in the case that Jesus speaks of, it has not been. In the case where there has been sexual immorality, that's another story, and he gives that as the one exception to what he is saying.

But the general rule is, except for the case of fornication, if a man divorces his wife and remarries, he is committing adultery in doing so. And the woman in the similar position also commits adultery when she remarries, as does the person they married. And what he is simply saying is you cannot enter a second marriage while you are involved in a present marriage.

And you are, whether you think so or not, if your husband or wife has not committed adultery, you might receive a legal divorce, but it is not a divorce in the sight of God. And therefore, in such a circumstance, a second marriage is not a marriage at all in God's sight. It is adultery, and something to be repented of.

Therefore, Jesus does not allow divorce or remarriage except for the cause of fornication. Essentially with Shammai in that particular dispute.