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## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

### *Marriage and Divorce – Getting it Right*

*September 8, 2019*

**Sermon Text:** Matt 19:1-12

**Scripture Reading:** Deuteronomy 24

2Ti 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

All of us would like to think that this describes our own handling of God's Word – *rightly handling the word of truth*. But so often our handling of Scripture has gotten all fogged up and confused by people who put themselves forward as biblical experts and lay their messed up twisted interpretations on us so that we then

filter our study of the Word through their grid. This has done HUGE harm to people down through the centuries and it is still happening today. Not just because of cult leaders parading as Christians, but also because of the ongoing trouble caused by the traditions of men being put to us as biblical truth.

*We must ALL just stop accepting doctrines as truth just because they are the things we have been taught as we have grown up in the church, or just because some Christian celebrity teaches them. Every one of us must examine the things we confess by the light of Scripture and not just lazily assume what a pastor or writer or our parents has said.*

There are very few places in the Bible that have been more abused than the words of Jesus that we have before us this morning in which He speaks to the issue of marriage and divorce. The subject comes up because the Pharisees presented Him with a hot potato question of their day:

Mat 19:1-12 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. (2) And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. (3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

(4) He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) 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'? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

(7) They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" (8) 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.

(9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

(10) The disciples said to him, "If

such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (11) But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. (12) 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."

Now, I suppose we should take more than one Lord's Day to deal with this passage as it is such an important issue which touches upon all of us. It is going to require quite a bit of careful background information or we will never get the interpretation of Jesus' words right.

I am going to be quoting quite a lot from a book written by David Instone-Brewer called Divorce and Remarriage in the Church. He is one of the very few, in my opinion, who has gotten the interpretation and application of Jesus' teaching here correct and I think that you will agree with me as I explain what he discovered through his academic studies of the writings of the rabbis. Here is something very important that he says early on:

The trouble with most theologies of divorce is that they aren't sensible.

They may give a reasonable account of most of the texts, in a forced way, but their conclusions just aren't practical in the fallen world we inhabit. Most of society thinks that the Bible has nothing sensible to say about divorce and remarriage, and even many Christians think that they can ignore the Scriptures on this particular subject. [Page 13]

God's Word is righteous and just. It is often deep and profound, even mysterious many times. But the Lord's teaching always squares with who He is. He is righteous and holy and good and merciful and wrathful and...the list goes on. And so is His Word. When we handle His Word rightly, our conclusions will be consistent with who the Lord is. So when we come up with conclusions that are UN-merciful and UN-righteous and, even, *stupid and foolish*, we are the ones who need to step back and re-examine our conclusions.

We must not be like a stubborn mule, refusing to acknowledge that we have gone wrong and lashing out at anyone who disagrees with us. Instone-Brewer has apparently felt some of this wrath:

And we no longer burn heretics-which which is fortunate for me, because some of you will conclude that I am

one! [Page 20]

Now, here is where we go wrong. We fail to understand the *question* that the Pharisees are asking Jesus. Here it is:

(3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

Seems straightforward, doesn't it? Well, except for the fact that we know these Pharisees hated Jesus and so their motives in asking the question are no doubt tainted with a desire to trip him up, to destroy any popularity with the people He might have, and so on. But their motives aside, we read their question and quickly conclude that *they are asking Jesus if there is any lawful, valid reason for divorce*. Right? Wrong. And when we get the question wrong, we also get Jesus' answer wrong:

(9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Is this not the common teaching and law in the church today? You can only divorce for adultery and if you divorce for any other reason and remarry then YOU are guilty of adultery?

But this is where we must slow down and *think* if we are to handle Scripture rightly.

“Jesus was answering their question in plain language and he wasn’t making a universal statement. Therefore when he said “nothing except `sexual immorality,” he was saying that the phrase “a cause of sexual immorality” did not include the extra ground of “Any Cause,” and he didn’t mean “there is no divorce ever, in any part of the Bible, except on the ground of `sexual immorality.” If he had been making this universal statement, he would have been contradicting Paul, who allowed divorce for abandonment (1 Cor 7:15)... [Page 61]

Understand? We will need to give you more background information on this key phrase “any cause,” but what I want us all to see right now is that it is obvious that Jesus *was not stating an absolute rule/law binding upon everyone in all cases*. That is to say, Jesus was not teaching that the only valid reason for divorce is sexual immorality and we know this because later on the Apostle Paul says this:

1Co 7:10-16 To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (11) (but if she does, she should

remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. (12) To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. (13) If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. (14) For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. **(15) But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.** (16) For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Jesus, the Lord, had taught that divorce never was God’s plan. Paul alludes to that when he says, “To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband...and the husband should not divorce his wife.” That is exactly what Jesus says here in Matthew 19 – that divorce never was God’s plan for marriage.

But then Paul says, (12) To the rest I

cause?”

say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. This was a question that Jesus had not addressed – the scenario of a believer married to an unbeliever. Under the Old Covenant this was not permitted and Jewish Christians might conclude that it was Christ’s will that they divorce an unbelieving spouse. Not so, says Paul.

But the point here for us is that *Paul has added additional inspired teaching about marriage and divorce. He has addressed still another reason that a Christian is permitted to divorce – namely, if an unbelieving spouse deserts them (refuses to live with them).*

So the point is that we know with certainty that Jesus here in Matthew 19 *was not stating an all-inclusive perpetual binding law on divorce, permitting it only in the case of sexual immorality. No. What Jesus WAS doing was answering the question of these Pharisees.*

And what was that question? Here is the key –

Mat 19:3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any

In every era and every culture there are phrases that are loaded with meaning for the people who live in those places and times, correct? Let me suggest some from our own time:

- MAGA
- Boy, that Senator really *Trumped* his enemies!
- LOL
- Watergate
- WOKE

Get the idea? These are words and ideas that are widely known and understood *in a given place and time so that no explanation is needed because everyone knows, just from the word or phrase, what is meant.*

There is one of those loaded phrases here in the Pharisees’ question and it is this:

*Any cause*

When the Pharisees used that phrase in their question, everyone, including Jesus, knew exactly what they were asking. Let me give you a bit more background. And the only way I can do it is to just read what Instone-

Brewer discovered in his rabbinic studies. Then we will plan to continue with this text next week, looking at what else Jesus says here and what the applications are for us:

Jewish men are also able to get a divorce quite easily, without needing to cite any grounds. Instead of saying "I divorce you" three times, a Jewish man has to write out a divorce certificate and give it to his wife; as soon as she receives it, she is legally divorced. As in Islamic law, only men can initiate divorce, and it is a groundless divorce-the man does not have to show that his wife has done anything wrong.

The groundless divorce also means that the woman cannot defend herself. Although the divorce certificate is part of the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1, this groundless divorce "for men only" did not become available until about the time of Jesus' birth. Before this, both Jewish men and women could divorce partners who broke their marriage obligations, as defined in the Old Testament.

We also saw in chapter three [of Instone-Brewer's book] that the Old Testament allowed only the wronged partner to initiate a divorce. If a woman did not feed, clothe or share

conjugal love with her husband faithfully, he could divorce her, and likewise, if a man did not give his wife money for food or clothing and did not share conjugal love with her, then she could divorce him. These grounds for divorce (based on Ex 21:10-11) were in use until about A.D. 70, but by the time that Jesus was preaching, in about A.D. 30, they were being used only rarely.

During Jesus' lifetime the new groundless divorce gradually grew in popularity, until, by about the end of the first century, it had totally replaced divorces based on Old Testament grounds.

This new type of divorce was invented by a rabbi called Hillel, who lived a few decades before Jesus, and was called the "Any Cause" divorce. The phrase that inspired it is in Deuteronomy 24:1, where a man divorces his wife for "a cause of sexual immorality": "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found a cause of sexual immorality in her, ... he writes her a certificate of divorce."<sup>1</sup>

Hillel asked, why did Moses use the phrase "cause of sexual immorality" when he could simply have said "sexual immorality"? Hillel reasoned

that the seemingly superfluous word *cause* must refer to another, different ground for divorce, and since this other ground is simply called a "cause," he concluded that it meant any cause.<sup>2</sup>

### THE "ANY CAUSE" DIVORCE

Hillel therefore thought that two types of divorce were taught in Deuteronomy 24:1: one for "sexual immorality" (adultery) and one they named "Any Cause." The Hillelite rabbis came to two main conclusions about the new "Any Cause" form of divorce.

First, they concluded that an "Any Cause" divorce could be carried out only by men, because the example case in Deuteronomy 24:1 involves a man who divorces his wife.

Second, they said that it could be used for any cause-such as the wife's burning a meal-so although the "Any Cause" divorce was theoretically based on some kind of fault, this fault could be such a small thing that it was, in effect, a groundless divorce.

The "Any Cause" type of divorce soon became very popular-especially because you didn't need any proof and didn't have to present your case in court. There was no need to try to prove in court that your wife had

neglected you- a very embarrassing process, because all your neighbors would find out the details you had been hiding from them for years! All you needed to do to carry out an "Any Cause" divorce was write out a divorce certificate and give it to your wife.

The only times when the "Any Cause" divorce was not more beneficial for the man were those few occasions when he could prove that his wife had been unfaithful-and especially when this unfaithfulness became public knowledge. He could get his revenge on his wife by taking her to court to obtain a divorce on the Old Testament ground of unfaithfulness. There was also a financial advantage for the man in this situation, because if he could prove that his wife had been unfaithful, he did not have to give her the marriage inheritance (*hetubah*) that he had promised to her when they married.

Despite the disadvantages to them, many women were also in favor of the "Any Cause" divorce, because it meant they would probably be able to claim their marriage inheritance (which, in many cases, was large enough to live on). If a wife was taken to court on the Old Testament grounds of being neglectful or abusive, she ran the risk of financial penury, because the court could decide to remove some or all of

her marriage inheritance from her. A court hearing also, of course, meant public shame and humiliation.

Very soon the "Any Cause" divorce had almost completely replaced the traditional Old Testament types of divorce. We can see how respectable it had become by the time of Jesus' birth because Joseph considered using this means to break off his betrothal to Mary: "Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Mt 1:19). Joseph did not want to put Mary through the disgrace of a public trial, so he decided to use the quiet "Any Cause" divorce that did not require any proof of wrongdoing. Matthew considered that this would be the action of a "just man," because Joseph could have ensured that he didn't have to pay Mary's marriage inheritance if he had decided to prove her guilty of adultery in court.

#### NOTHING EXCEPT "SEXUAL IMMORALITY"

Not everyone accepted this new type of divorce. The disciples of Shammai, a rival of Hillel who often disagreed with him, said that Hillel had interpreted the Scriptures wrongly and that the whole phrase "a cause of sexual immorality" meant nothing more than the ground of sexual

immorality; it did not mean two grounds, sexual immorality and "Any Cause." They summarized their opinion by saying that, on the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1, "a man should not divorce his wife except he has found 'sexual immorality' in her." 3

The interpretation of this short phrase, "a cause of sexual immorality," was a matter of huge public debate. The disciples of Shammai wanted people to restrict themselves to divorces based on the Old Testament grounds—unfaithfulness in Deuteronomy 24:1 and neglect of food, clothing or conjugal love in Exodus 21:10-11. But the common people preferred Hillel's interpretation, which added the "Any Cause" divorce. The ordinary people were not too interested in the intricate arguments over these interpretations, but because divorce was common in first-century Judaism, they did have to know the basics of the debate so that they could pick the right lawyers.

Most people would have had a friend or relative who had been through a divorce, and they would therefore have known that Hillel allowed "Any Cause" divorces and that Shammai said that "a cause of sexual immorality" meant nothing except divorce for sexual immorality. In the same way, nowadays, when divorce is also very common, most people

recognize legal jargon like "spousal support" and "custody" without necessarily understanding their detailed meanings.

### ASKING JESUS' OPINION

Therefore, by the time of Jesus, almost every divorce was an "Any Cause" divorce, but the rabbis were still arguing about it. These rabbis decided to ask Jesus what he thought: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for `any cause'?" (see Mt 19:3). This verse is normally translated "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" or "... for any reason?" As I mentioned in chapter one, when I was rereading these familiar words with the benefit of my rabbinic studies, I found that I was understanding the text differently.

I remembered that the Hillelites called their new form of divorce the "Any Cause" divorce—a legal term that was used by other Jews such as Philo and Josephus as well as by the rabbis themselves.' The identification of this term was not my own, new discovery—many people had already written a great deal about the Hillelite divorce. *Yet this fact had never been taken into account by any of the biblical translations.* According to the standard translations, such as "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" the Pharisees appear to be asking Jesus if he thought divorce itself was lawful or not. But the question "Is it lawful to

divorce?" would have been an illogical one. To the Jews divorce referred to a procedure that is defined in the law of Moses—and the law of Moses cannot be "unlawful"! However, if you translate the question "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for `Any Cause'?" it makes perfect sense. The rabbis wanted to know what Jesus thought about the new "Any Cause" type of divorce and how he interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1.

The account of this debate with the Pharisees is highly abbreviated because cause it had to fit it into a short Gospel. Throughout the Gospels, speeches are shortened to a couple of sentences, and fascinating incidents that might otherwise have taken a whole book to recount are summarized in just one paragraph.

These shortened accounts did not matter for a first-century Jew, who knew the context and the Old Testament very well, but they sometimes make things a little obscure for a modern reader. Therefore we have to work hard at unpacking the abbreviated account of what Jesus and the Pharisees said. Although superfluous phrases like "for `Any Cause'" were usually omitted, Matthew decided to state the question in full in order to help his readers; he was writing his Gospel a little later than Mark, at a time when this rabbinic

I would like you to think carefully about these things this week – two points in particular:

1. This is an example of the mishandling of Scripture and the terrible damage such errors do to people, and
2. Where does the bulk of your theology come from? Are you a diligent student of God's Word, guided and led by His Spirit of Truth? Or is your Christianity more the product of what others have told you?

Because the Lord gives us all we need to see His truth, and He expects each of us to use the means and resources He has given us to do so.

debate had become less well known. Jesus was asked if he agreed with the new Hillelite "Any Cause" divorce, but he wasn't really interested in this debate and was more concerned, as we will see below, to tell the Hillelites and Shammaites where they had both gone wrong.

When the rabbis eventually got Jesus back to their question, he gave the same straightforward interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 that Shammai taught; that is, he said that the phrase "a cause of sexual immorality" meant "nothing except `sexual immorality'" And to emphasize this, Jesus said that if someone got divorced on the basis of any other interpretation (i.e., the "Any Cause" divorce), they were not properly divorced, and so if they remarried they would be committing adultery (Mt 19:9).

Most interpreters have not recognized that Jesus is quoting the rabbinic legal phrases "divorce for `Any Cause'" and "nothing except 'sexual immorality'" As a result, they think that Jesus was asked "Is it ever lawful to divorce?" and that he answered "No-except in cases of sexual immorality"

David Instone-Brewer. Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities (p. 54-