

Jesus Ministers in Perea

by John F. Walvoord

Jesus teaches on the importance of faith, marriage, and the kingdom of heaven, while emphasizing the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of God.

Scripture: Matthew 19:6-30

Topics: "Marriage And Divorce", "Wealth And Salvation"

Description

John F. Walvoord delivers a sermon on Jesus' teachings on divorce, emphasizing the importance of marriage as a sacred union established by God and warning against the dangers of divorce and remarriage. Jesus addresses the Pharisees' questions by highlighting the original purpose of marriage and the severity of divorce, pointing out that it leads to adultery unless in cases of fornication. He also discusses the challenges that riches pose to entering the kingdom of heaven, illustrating that salvation is impossible through human efforts alone but requires a supernatural work of God.

Transcript

Discourse on Divorce, 19:1-12

Leaving Capernaum for the last time, Jesus began His journey which was to end in Jerusalem and the cross. The expression "into the coasts of Judaea beyond the Jordan" means the region beyond Judea to the east of the Jordan. By taking this route, Christ avoided Samaria, where He had ministered before, and passed through territory that was new to His public ministry. As He went, crowds following Him from Galilee were joined by others.

Morgan points out that the crowds had four classes: those who came with need, bringing their sick; those who came to trap Him; those who came in admiration; and at least one with a sincere question.⁹⁴ A parallel account to Matthew 19 is found in Mark 10:1-31. Only Matthew records, however, that His ministry included healing the sick.

Both Mark and Matthew, however, record the question of the Pharisees regarding divorce, recorded in Matthew 19:3, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" Matthew observes that the Pharisees did this in order to tempt Jesus, as the law of Moses clearly provided for divorce, but they wanted to raise the tricky question as to what just causes for divorce were. Perhaps some in the crowd had heard the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus had said that divorce should be limited to cases where there was fornication (5:31-32), which was more strict than the law of Moses.

Jesus, in answering them, appealed to the law of creation, that God had made both male and female, and had ordained that marriage should make them "one flesh." Jesus, therefore, referred to the basic law of creation and concluded, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (19:6).

The Pharisees then brought up the fact that the law of Moses was more lenient. Jesus replied by indicating that this was a concession to the hardness of their hearts, but this was not God's intention in marriage. Accordingly, He repeated the principle laid down in Matthew 5, that unless fornication breaks the marriage, divorce and remarriage constitutes adultery.

As Lenski observes, behind the Pharisees' question was a controversy in different schools of thought among the Jews, in which the school of Shammai was strict, and the school of Hillel, which permitted divorce for almost any cause, was more lax and had been followed by many of the Jews.⁹⁵ The debate hinges on Deuteronomy 24:1, where divorce was permitted if the husband "found some uncleanness in her," which could be interpreted as almost any sort of disfavor. Jesus avoided the trap of the Pharisees by appealing to the original purpose in marriage. While arguing from Deuteronomy 24:1, they were neglecting Genesis 1:27. Mark records additional conversation between the Pharisees and Jesus.

The answer of Jesus also perplexed the disciples, and later, according to Mark 10:10, when they were "in the house," they asked Him further about it. The disciples said to Jesus, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Mt 19:10). Creatures of their generation, even though they were disciples of Christ, they regarded the difficulty of divorce, which could be granted only on the ground of the unfaithfulness of the wife, as making the whole marriage relation an undesirable union. Actually, what they were saying was that they preferred the easier way, which had become traditional among the Jews, that of securing a divorce simply because the wife is no longer attractive to the husband.

The use of this passage to support celibacy by the Roman church is without justification. It is clear that Jesus did not view marriage as undesirable, except in special cases, as in His own state of celibacy. Replying to the disciples, He pointed out that marriage is not for everyone. Some are born eunuchs, that is, without normal sexual desire. Others, especially slaves, have been castrated. Still others "have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (v. 12). By this, He did not mean self-imposed castration, as was once advocated by the early church and practiced, for instance, by Origen, through incorrect understanding of this passage.

In a word, not all are obligated to be married and some obviously, to fulfill their calling, cannot be. This, however, does not obviate the normal law of marriage, nor does it change or limit the strict limitations placed upon divorce. On the other hand, the tendency to rule out divorce for any cause whatever seems unjustified on the basis of Christ's teaching and also on the basis of the Old Testament prohibition of the remarriage of divorced couples who have married another, which recognizes the fact of the divorce. The complete teaching of the New Testament on divorce includes Paul's exhortation in Romans 7:1-3 and in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. These passages permit divorce, but remarriage is allowed only in cases where divorce is caused by fornication or after the death of one party to the marriage.

Jesus Blesses the Children, 19:13-15

Although there is no definite connection between the discourse on divorce and the incident regarding children, it is obvious that one of the evils of divorce is the effect on the children. As Jesus was teaching, ambitious parents brought their small children to have Jesus put His hands on them and pray for them (cf. Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17). The scene was probably the same as "in the house," mentioned in Mark

10:10. The disciples felt that this was an unwarranted intrusion into the privacy of Jesus, and attempted to restrict the children, but Jesus rebuked the disciples instead saying, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:14). While there is no mention that He actually prayed for them, Mark's gospel adds that He took the children up in His arms and blessed them (Mk 10:13-16). It is of interest that children instinctively recognized in Jesus one who loved them and cared for them, and they came to Him freely. The one who was the Friend of publicans and sinners was also the Friend of children.

Rich Young Ruler, 19:16-22

Later, departing from the house, Jesus was approached by a young man who raised the question, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Parallel accounts are found in Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27. Mark 10:17 records that he came running and kneeled before asking his question. A similar question had been asked by the lawyer in Luke 10:25-29 on another occasion.

In reply, Jesus first called attention to the fact that he had called Him "good," which properly refers only to God. As Glover notes, "Good Master is compliment, not adoration. He has no sense of sin, which shows that his standard was poor and conscience dull."⁹⁶ But Jesus did not wait for the young man's reply. He instructed him that if he really wanted to enter into life, he should keep the commandments. When the young man replied, asking which commandments, Jesus quoted some of the Ten Commandments concerning murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and honoring one's father and mother. Significantly, Jesus did not quote the tenth commandment, forbidding covetousness, but added the commandment not found in the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour, as thyself" (Lev 19:18).

The young man replied that he had kept all these commandments from his youth. Obviously, he had a fine, moral character, but he sensed that something was lacking, and he asked, "What lack I yet?" Possibly he was troubled by the tenth commandment. Mark 10:21 adds at this point, "Jesus beholding him loved him."

But one thing was still lacking, and Jesus said to him, "If thou wilt be perfect," that is, reach the ultimate goal, "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Mt 19: 21). The reply of Christ seems to have left the young man speechless, as he coveted riches, and he went quietly away in deep disappointment, for he had great possessions.

The question is naturally raised by this incident whether it is necessary for a rich man to give up all his possessions in order to receive eternal life. Is not salvation by faith and by grace and not by works?

The answer seems to be that in this instance, the questioning of Jesus brought out the shallowness of the young man's faith. When it came right down to it, he trusted his riches and his position more than he trusted in Jesus Christ. His real problem was lack of faith in Christ, whom he considered a good Teacher but who apparently was not to be regarded as one who had the right to demand that he give up all in order to follow Him. Faith is ultimately a choice, and the young man chose riches rather than Jesus.

Relation of Discipleship to Riches, 19:23-30

After the young ruler had left, Jesus observed to His disciples, "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (19:23). In contrast to the prevailing opinion of the Jews, who,

through their riches, thought they were gaining favor with God, Jesus pointed out that often riches are a stumbling block rather than a stepping-stone for those entering the kingdom. He further commented, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (v. 24). The disciples replied in their amazement, "Who then can be saved?"

Various explanations have been given for Christ's illustration of a camel going through a needle's eye. As Lenski points out, the Talmud used an elephant in the same illustration and the Koran used the same illustration as Jesus did.⁹⁷ Thus construed, He was saying, in effect, that it is impossible.

Some have taken the needle's eye to be a reference to a small, low gate into a walled city requiring one entering to take off his load and crawl through the hole on his knees,⁹⁸ but there is no evidence that this is the intended meaning. Like the reference to the blind guides, as in Matthew 23:24, who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, He was illustrating that which is impossible to do naturally. Jesus was not saying simply that it is difficult for rich men to be saved. What He was saying was that it takes a miracle, a supernatural work of God. This is clear in the comment of Jesus in answering the disciples' question, "Who then can be saved?" He stated, "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (19:26). The new birth, as an act of creation, is not something that comes naturally or easily.

Note should be taken that in verse 24, Jesus used the expression "the kingdom of God" in contrast to the usual expression "kingdom of heaven." If there is a distinction, the kingdom of God refers to the sphere of salvation, not merely the sphere of profession. A rich man could profess to follow Christ, but apart from supernatural grace, he could not enter into salvation.

The discourse of Christ on the place of riches on earth in contrast to "treasure in heaven" (v. 21) led to Peter's next question, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" (v. 27).

To this practical question, Christ gave a specific answer. He stated that in the "regeneration," or restoration of the kingdom, "When the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory," the disciples also "shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (v. 28). This is clearly a picture of the millennial earth, not heaven. Late in Christ's ministry, He supports the concept that the kingdom, while postponed as far as human expectation is concerned, is nevertheless certain of fulfillment following His second coming.

In addition to the promise that they shall sit on thrones acting as judges, Jesus gave the promise to all His disciples who, for Christ's sake, have forsaken houses, brethren, sister, father, mother, wife, children, or lands, that they shall receive an hundredfold reward in addition to having eternal life. There is no uncertainty about the riches of heaven, which will endure long after the treasures of the rich young ruler have been dissipated.

One final word of caution was given by Jesus, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (v. 30). By this, Jesus meant that God's estimation of worthiness for reward may be entirely different than man's estimation. Those prominent in this life may not necessarily be first in reward in the life to come. The widow who gave her two mites but had nothing else to give may be ahead of those who have given much. Those who labor merely for reward may miss it. His discussion of this point is illustrated in the next chapter.

94 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 236.

95 R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, pp. 727-28.

96 Richard Glover, A Teacher's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, p. 218.

97 Lenski, p. 755.

98 Ibid.

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