

Exegetical Notes, Matthew 19:1-12
“The Text I Dread to Touch”

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Matthew 19:1-12

Verse 1

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan.

- These events happened in what is the modern day nation of Jordan on the east side of the Jordan River

Verse 2

Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

- Even in this place, large crowds came to Jesus, indicating that his reputation has preceded him.
- He continues to work healing miracles.

Verse 3

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

- As Jesus’ popularity with the people grew, the Pharisees, the conservative religious leaders of the day, became increasingly driven to expose him to the people for the fraud they believed him to be. In this case, they hoped to involve him in the “divorce debate” that raged among the rabbis of the time.
- That debate ran along these lines:
 - + The Law of Moses said, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if she leaves his house and becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not

allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

+ The rabbis in Jesus’ day agreed that in these provisions Moses allowed for divorce. They agreed that if a man wanted to divorce his wife, all he had to do was write the certificate of divorce and send her away. They agreed that there was no provision in the Law of Moses which allowed a woman to initiate divorce proceedings against her husband. However, the rabbis disagreed about the allowed grounds for divorce.

+ The students of the teacher Shammai argued that the phrase, “something indecent about her” specifically meant that the woman had committed adultery and that, therefore, adultery was the only legal grounds for divorce in the Law of Moses.

+ The students of the teacher Hillel argued that this same phrase was undefined and that it allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever. Anything that a husband found “displeasing” about his wife was grounds for divorce.

- The question that the Pharisees asked Jesus was designed to pull him into this controversy. No matter how he answered the question, he was sure to offend some of those in the crowd. If he answered in favor of the school of Hillel, he would offend those of the school of Shammai and vice versa. They thought that they had caught Jesus in a perfect bind. No matter what he said in answer to their question, he would lose some followers.

Verse 4-6

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

- Jesus returns the discussion to the original design for marriage (See Genesis 1:27 and 2:24). In so doing he appeals to a higher authority than Moses. He appeals to the Creator, God himself. He asserts that God’s design for marriage did not allow for divorce. A husband and wife become “one flesh” and cannot be separated.

Verse 7

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

- Since neither of the schools of thought related to divorce questioned the right of a man to divorce his wife, but only argued the allowable grounds for such action, Jesus' contention that divorce was not allowable according to the original design for marriage, confused the Pharisees. They assumed that Jesus was uninformed and so reminded him that Moses had allowed for divorce on some grounds.

Verse 8-9

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

- Jesus responds to their inquiry as follows:
 - + Moses "permitted" divorce because "your hearts were hard." Moses allowed for divorce because he knew that men would divorce their wives. The words imply that it was allowed but not approved and that this was a concession to the sinfulness of the human heart.
 - + Even though divorce was "permitted" it was never the intention of God.
- Jesus then seems to side with the school of Shammai taking the more restrictive understanding of the law and arguing that the only acceptable grounds for divorce is adultery. However, that only seems to be the case.
- What Jesus actually says is that if a man divorces his wife for any other reason than adultery, and marries another, he commits adultery. If a man divorces his wife because she has committed adultery, he is not considered to be guilty of adultery. However, divorce is still not permitted according to God's original intention for marriage. (See the Old Testament story of Hosea.)

Verse 10

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

- Realizing that there is no acceptable grounds for breaking the marriage bond according to God's original design, the disciples recognize the seriousness of this commitment and decide that it would be better to avoid marriage altogether. (See Ephesians 5:31-33.).

Verse 11-12

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men: and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

- Jesus agrees with the disciples that marriage is a very serious commitment. He argues that some people will choose to avoid it for various reasons. However, he does not argue that all people should decide not to be married. However, it is a very serious step and involves a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. It should not be entered into lightly.

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