

The Validity of Matthew 19:3-12 Today

Those who have suggested that we discount all of Jesus' teaching before the cross seem to do so with one predominant thought in mind. They wish to somehow relieve the church of the difficult issue of marriage, divorce and remarriage. Just this week a brother has sent me an email in which he describes as a "cancer" the usual teaching on the subject.

Now we certainly agree with this brother on two accounts. First, the teaching that proper remarriage occurs only after the unfaithfulness of one partner or the death of a partner is tough, especially in our world today. When Jesus' own disciples heard him they commented, "*If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry*" (Matthew 19:10, NASB). Today, a family which has never been involved in a divorce is indeed rare. Sadly, their lives are often contrary to the clear teaching of this passage. There is nothing easy about the teaching, then or now.

Second, we agree that traditions are irrelevant to the discussion. It makes no difference what a great writer, debater or editor once said. Only God's Word can properly guide our lives.

But beyond these two points we generally part company with the brother. He has created an entirely new and novel approach to the interpretation of Scripture so that he can set aside Matthew 19. Let's look at what the Bible says and make some observations.

The text shows that this discussion was prompted by influential Jews (Pharisees) who were trying to test Jesus. Their question was whether a man could divorce his wife for any reason (Matthew 19:3). Actually, God had never permitted divorce for just any reason. He did however make an allowance in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This allowance or permission, which the Pharisees mentioned in Matthew 19:7 was part of the Old Testament law and is not applicable today.

However the crucial point that bears upon our lives today is found in what Jesus said, not what was spoken by the Pharisees. Look carefully at Jesus' response which begins in verse 4. "*Have you not read that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female and said For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they twain shall be one flesh....what therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder*" (Matthew 19:4-6). In his initial answer, Jesus takes the discussion out of the realm of Judaism and restates God's original plan for marriage, a plan given "*at the beginning.*" The Jews respond by stating Moses' exception but Jesus again rejects their claims by reminding them that Moses allowed divorce because of their hardness but such an exemption or allowance did not exist "*from the beginning*" (Matthew 19:8).

Then, in verse 9, Jesus expands the teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage when he issues a command that is more specific than any found in either Mosaic law or in God's law prior to Sinai. His contrast is as follows, "*And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery*" (Matthew 19:9). Moses' law was vague and had been the subject of great discussion among the Rabbi's. Jesus' is clear, and, since it was new and not part of either Patriarchal or Mosaic law, it must belong to the church age. Else we are faced with crafting a new, intermediate era of which the Bible knows none.

Does Matthew 19 belong to the present church age? It absolutely does. Failure to heed the warnings therein are devastating.

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