

Matthew 19 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 19:1-12 THE KING AND THE MARRIAGE LAWS

Matthew 19:1,2 AND it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings, he departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judea beyond Jordan; and great multitudes followed him; and he healed them there.

He had finished these sayings upon forgiveness, and so he hastened to other work which was not finished. He was ever on the move, and he departed from Galilee, which had received so much of his care, that other regions might enjoy his ministry. He now turned more to the south, into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan, and he did good at every turn. when he had finished speaking to the disciples, he began working deeds of grace in a new district, and great multitudes followed him. Ever the crowd was at his heels, held both by his word and by his work. He was drawing near to Jerusalem, and his foes were on the watch; but he did not restrain his works of mercy because of their jealous scrutiny: he healed, them THERE.

The place of our Lord's gracious work is worthy to be remembered.

Where the need was, there the help was given.

Matthew 19:3. The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him.

Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?

Here are these vipers again! What perseverance in malice! Little cared they for instruction, yet they assumed the air of inquirers. In truth, they were upon the catch, and were ready to dispute with him whatever he might say.

The question is cunningly worded "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" The looser the terms of a question, the more likely is it to entangle the person interrogated. Their own consciences might have told them that the marriage bond is not to be severed for any and every reason that a man likes to mention. Yet it was a question much disputed at the time, whether a man could send away his wife at pleasure, or whether there must be some serious reason alleged. Whatever Jesus might say, the Pharisees meant to use his verdict against him.

Matthew 19:4-6. And he answered and said unto them, Have ye 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. Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

In his reply, Jesus challenges their knowledge of the law: "Have ye not read?" It was a forcible mode of appealing to their own boasted acquaintance with the books of Moses. Our Lord honors Holy Scripture by drawing his argument therefrom. He chose specially to set his seal upon a part of the story of creation — that story which modern critics speak of as if it were fable or myth. He took his hearers back to the beginning when God made them male and female, and made them sons. "In the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27).

The woman was taken out of man, and Adam truly said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). By marriage this unity is set forth and embodied under divine sanction. This oneness is of the most real and vital kind: "They are no more twain, but one flesh." All other ties are feeble compared with this: even father and mother must stand second to the wife: "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and, shall cleave to his wife." Being divinely appointed, this union must not be broken by the caprice of men: "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." Our Lord thus decides for the life-long perpetuity of the marriage bond, in opposition to those who allowed divorce for "every cause", which very frequently meant for no cause whatever,

Matthew 19:7. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?

Every reader of the passage in the books of Moses which is here referred to will be struck with the Pharisees' unfair rendering of it. In Deuteronomy 24:1,2, we read: "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife." Moses commanded nothing in this instance; but barely tolerated, and greatly limited a custom then in vogue. To set Moses against Moses is not a new device; but the Pharisees would hardly venture to set Moses against God, and make him command an alteration of a divine law ordained from the beginning; yet our Lord made them see that they would have to do this to maintain the theory of easy divorce. The fact is, that Moses found divorce in existence to an almost unlimited extent, and he wisely commenced its overthrow by curtailing the custom rather than by absolutely forbidding it at once. They were not allowed to send away a wife with a hasty word, but must make a deliberate, solemn ceremonial of it by preparing and giving a writing of divorcement; and this was only allowed in a special case: "because he hath found some uncleanness in her." Although many of the Pharisees spirited away this last limitation, and considered that the enactment in Deuteronomy sanctioned almost unlimited divorce, they were not unanimous in the matter, and were perpetually disputing over it. Hence there were many ways in which our Lord's decision could be turned against him, whatever it might be.

Matthew 19:8. He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so.

Moses tolerated and circumscribed an evil custom which he knew that such a people would not relinquish after its having been established among them for so long a time. They could not bear a higher law, and so he treated them as persons diseased with hardness of heart, hoping to lead them back to an older and better state of things by possible stages. As impurity ceased, and as the spirit of true religion would influence the nation, the need for divorce, and even the least desire for it, would die out. There was no provision in paradise for Adam's putting away Eve; there was no desire for divorce in the golden age. The enactment of the Mosaic law of divorce was modern and temporary; and in the form into which a loose interpretation of Scripture had distorted it, it was not defensible.

Matthew 19:9. 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.

Fornication makes the guilty person a fit subject for just and lawful divorce; for it is a virtual disannulling of the marriage bond. In a case of fornication, upon clear proof, the tie can be loosed; but in no other case.

Any other sort of divorce is by the law of God null and void, and it involves the persons who act upon it in the crime of adultery. Whoso marrieth her who is put away doth commit adultery; since she is not really divorced, but remains the wife of her former husband. Our King tolerates none of those enactments which, in certain countries, trifle with the bonds of matrimony. Nations may make what laws they dare, but they cannot alter facts: persons once married are, in the sight of God, married for life, with the one exception of proven fornication.

Matthew 19:10. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.

They had come to look upon the ease of slipping the marriage-knot as a sort of relief; and on marriage itself, without the power of escaping from it by divorce, as an evil thing, or at least as very likely to prove so. Better not marry if you marry for life: this seemed to be their notion. Even his disciples, looking at the risks of unhappy married life, concluded that it were better to remain single. They said, "It is good not to marry;" and there was a measure of truth in their declaration.

Matthew 19:11. But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.

It may be better in some respects not to marry; but all men cannot receive this saying, and put it into practice: it would be the end of the race if they could. A single life is not for all, nor for many: nature forbids. To some, celibacy is better than marriage; but such are peculiar in constitution, or in circumstances. Abstinence from marriage is to a few a choice gift, answering high purposes; but to the many, marriage is as necessary as it is honorable.

Matthew 19:12. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

Some have but feeble desires concerning marriage, and they were so born.

They will find it good to remain as they are. Others subdue the desires of nature, for holy and laudable reasons, for the kingdom of heaven's sake; but this is not for all, nor for many. It is optional with individuals to marry or not: if they marry, nature commends, but grace is silent; if they forbear for Christ's sake, grace commends, and nature does not forbid. Enforced celibacy is the seed-bed of sins. "Marriage is honorable in all" Violations of purity are abominable in the sight of the Lord. In this matter we need guidance and grace if we follow the usual way; and if we elect the less frequented road, we shall need grace and guidance even more. As to a resolve to persevere in a single life: He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

MATTHEW 19:13-15 THE GREAT KING AMONG THE LITTLE CHILDREN

Matthew 19:13. Then there were brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them.

From questions of marriage to the subject of children was an easy and natural step, and providence so arranged events that our Lord was led to proceed from the one to the other.

We see how gentle was our King in the fact that anyone thought of bringing boys and girls to him. Their friends brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and bestow a blessing; and also lift up his hands to God, and pray for them. This was a very natural desire on the part of devout parents, and it showed much faith in our Lord's condescension. We feel sure that the mothers brought them, for still holy women are doing the same. The disciples, jealous for their Lord's honor, bade the mothers and nurses forbear. They judged that it was too childish an act on the mothers' part, and it was treating the great Teacher too familiarly. Were not the disciples the more childish of the two in imagining that their Lord would be unkind to babes?

Matthew 19:14. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

The Lord is more lowly than his servants. He bids them cease to hinder the little children; he calls them to himself; he declares that they are the very kind of people of whom his heavenly kingdom is made up. "Of such is the kingdom of heaven" — this is the banner of the Sunday school. Children, and those like them, may freely come into the kingdom of the Lord of heaven; yea, these are the characters who alone can enter into that kingdom.

Matthew 19:15. And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.

He did not baptize them, but he did bless them. The touch of his hands meant more than pen can write. Happy children who shared that laying on of hands; for those hands were neither empty nor feeble!

Jesus did not tarry even with this lovely company, but hastened on to his appointed work, and departed thence. Yet he had said so much in the two sentences of the former verse that earth and heaven will never cease to be the richer for them.

MATTHEW 19:16-30 THE KING SETTLES THE ORDER OF PRECEDENCE

Matthew 19:16. And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

Here was one who thought himself first, yet he had to go last; yea, and even to go away sorrowful.

He was a self-sufficient gentleman: he seemed to feel that one good thing from him would be enough, and that he could and would do it at once. He had some misgivings, or he would not have asked the question, "What good thing shall I do?" Perhaps, even in so admirable a life as his own, something might yet be lacking. But if it should turn out to be so, he could readily supply the lack.

He was very respectful, and addressed the Lord Jesus as "Good Master." So far, so good. His question was of great personal importance. "What shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Oh, that more young men would ask a similar question! It was a very suitable enquiry for an earnest person, such as he undoubtedly was. He sought eternal life, and could not be content with the honors of the hour. He only wanted to know what to do to win that eternal life, and he would set about it at once.

This is a hopeful inquirer. Surely he will be a grand, convert! Let us wait a little, and we shall see.

Matthew 19:17. And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

Our Lord cared not for empty compliments, and so he asks, "Why callest thou me good?" Many modern heretics praise Jesus, and their commendations are such an insult to his glorious person that he might well say, "Why callest thou me good? Did this man really mean it? If so, the Lord Jesus would let him know by a hint that he to whom he spake was more than man. The argument is clear: either Jesus was good, or he ought not to have called him good; but as there is none good but God, Jesus who is good must be God.

As for the question of having eternal life through a good work, Jesus answers him on his own ground. Life by the law comes only by keeping its commands: "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." No one has ever fulfilled them so as to be good: did this young man think that he could do so? Yet, on the ground of law, if he would deserve eternal life as a reward, he must be as good as God, and keep the commandments to perfection. Thus the rugged way of works was set before him; not that he might attempt to win eternal life thereby, but that he might perceive his own shortcomings, and so feel his weakness as to look for salvation by some other method.

Matthew 19:18, 19. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

The questioner ventures to ask, "Which?" Did he suppose that certain ceremonial precepts would be mentioned? Probably he did, for he felt himself quite sure upon all the points of the moral law. Our Lord, however, gives him nothing new, but turns to the ancient Decalogue. He quotes the second table of the law first, and begins with commands which would appear to the young man to be the mere commonplaces of morality. The last-quoted command summarized the rest, and it ought to have opened the questioner's eyes to his shortcomings; for who has loved his neighbor as himself? The young aristocrat was not, however, convicted of sin. He pressed his enquiry as to salvation by works because he thought himself on the road to winning it.

Matthew 19:20. The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

Perhaps he spoke the truth, as he understood the law. He had maintained an excellent moral character from his early boyhood. He

felt that in act and deed he had kept all those commands without a fault of any consequence.

He was no braggart, but could honestly claim to have led a commendable life. He was, no doubt, a very exemplary person, and so amiable that Jesus looked on him very lovingly. We know some who are like him, and may be described "as touching the law, blameless." But he was not all he thought himself to be: he did not love his neighbor as himself, as he would soon be made to see. "What lack I yet?" is an enquiry few would dare to put. He felt that if there was anything lacking in him, he was altogether ignorant as to what it could be. His self esteem needed no increasing.

Matthew 19:21. Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

Our Lord brings him to the test of the first table of the law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart." If he did this, he would be willing, at a divine command, to part with his property, even as Abraham was ready to offer up his son. Our Lord Jesus, as God, claimed from him an unusual sacrifice. Did he love God sufficiently to make it? The command of our Lord was a challenge to self-righteousness to prove its own profession. We may also regard it as putting on its trial his profession to have loved his neighbor as himself. Did he love the poor as well as himself? If so, it would be no hardship to sell his possessions, and give to the poor. We must not infer that Jesus would have all his followers part with all that they have: it was a test for this one man: "If thou wilt be perfect." Still, if we love our possessions more than we love God, we are idolaters; and if we hug our property so as to let the poor hunger, we cannot be said to love them as ourselves. We have heard of persons claiming to be perfect, and yet retaining possession of hundreds of thousands of pounds; and we have doubted their perfection. Was there not a cause? Compassion for poverty, zeal for the truth, and love of doing good, will hardly allow of any Christian's owning enormous riches. At any rate, such wealthy ones will find it hard to render an account at the last great day. We must love Jesus and his great cause better than our wealth, or else we are not his true followers. If our religion were ever put to the great test of fierce persecution, and we had to part with all our property, or part with Christ, hesitation would be fatal.

Matthew 19:22. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

He could not go the whole length of his own plan. He would be saved by works; yet he would not carry out his works to the full of the law's demand. He failed to observe the spirit both of the second and the first table. He loved not his poor brother as himself; he loved not God in Christ Jesus with all his heart and soul. He thought himself first; but he soon stood behind the last, for he went away sorrowful. Thus the Savior tests character. That which glittered so much is not found to be gold. This man's great possessions, so possessed him that he never possessed his own soul.

Matthew 19:23. Then Jesus said unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Worldly possessions, apart from divine grace, have a deadening, hardening, hampering influence upon the soul. Some rich men do enter into the kingdom of heaven, but it is hard for them; very hard indeed. The temptation is to let riches rule the mind; and when that is the case, the kingdom of this world opposes the kingdom of heaven. Houses and land, and gold and silver, act as bird-lime to the soul, and prevent its rising towards heaven. This is especially the case in persecuting times; but it is sufficiently a fact in all periods of human history. It is worthy of notice that this hard sentence was intended for Christians; for it is written, Then Jesus said unto his disciples, "Verily I say UNTO YOU."

Matthew 19:24. And again I say unto you, 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.

Weighty words are introduced with the authoritative formula, Again I say unto you. Into this statement our Lord throws the full weight of his personality. He uses an expressive proverb, which means precisely what the words convey to the common reader. There is no sense in hunting up abstruse metaphors where the proverbial teaching is as plain as possible.

He would show that wealth is far more a hindrance than a help to those who would enter into the kingdom of God: in fact, such a hindrance as to render the matter practically impossible without divine interposition. A camel is not only large, but it has humps, and how can it go through so small an opening as the eye of a needle? It could not make such a passage except by a strange miracle; nor can a rich man enter into the kingdom of God except by a marvel of grace. How few of the rich even hear the gospel! They are too great, too fine, too busy, too proud to regard the lowly preacher of the gospel of the poor. If, perchance, they do hear the heavenly message, they have not the necessities and tribulations which drive men from the present world to seek consolation in the world to come, and so they feel no need to accept Christ. "Gold and the gospel seldom do agree." Those who are rich in this world, in the vast majority of instances, scorn to become subjects of the kingdom in which faith is riches, and holiness is honor.

Should the rich begin the divine life, how hard it is for them to persevere amid the cares, the luxuries, the temptations of a wealthy position! The difficulties are enormous when we think of the pride of life, the flattery of rank, the danger of power, the risk of carnal security. Yet, blessed be God, we have seen rich men become poor in spirit! We have seen camels go through this needle's eye, humps and all! We hope to see many more such miracles of almighty grace.

Matthew 19:25. When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

No common astonishment filled them. Much astounding truth they had already heard from their Master; but this exceeded all, and they were exceedingly amazed. They had previously thought that wealth was an advantage: and now they judged that if those who had riches could only be saved with surpassing difficulty, poor working-men like themselves could have no hope whatever. They were ready to despair; and therefore they put to their Lord the very natural question, "Who then can be saved?" Even our Lord's disciples felt themselves bewildered by his plain utterance, so hard is it to get rid of prejudices in favor of wealth.

Matthew 19:26. But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

Jesus beheld them. He looked on them with pity and with love, and told them that God could do that which, apart from him, would never come to pass. To enter the kingdom is impossible to man unaided: one sin or another blocks the way. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches are a sadly effective barrier to the soul when it attempts to enter the city of holiness; but God can cause those barriers to yield, and enable the soul to enter by the narrow way. He is mighty to save. With God all things are possible. What a joyful truth for the writer and the reader! Our salvation, when we view our own weakness and the power of sin, is impossible with men. Only when we turn to God and his grace, does salvation range among the possibilities.

The rich man is set by our Lord, not at the head, but at the foot of the line of aspirants for the kingdom.

Lord, my hope of being found in thy kingdom lies in thy power, and grace, and not in my possessions!

Matthew 19:27. Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

Here is another claimant for a front place. Peter answered, adding, as he seemed to think, a question needful for the full discussion of the subject.

Peter speaks for his brethren: "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee," we have done what the rich young man refused to do: "What shall we have therefore?" He spoke as the representative of a number who had become poor for the kingdom's sake: surely these must have a large reward. Little as these first believers had to leave, it was their all, and they had forsaken it to follow Jesus: Peter would fain hear what their recompense would be what Peter said was true, but it was not wisely spoken. It has a selfish, grasping look, and it is worded so barely that it ought not in that fashion to have come from a servant to his Lord. After all, what have any of us to lose for Jesus compared with what we gain by him? "What shall we have?" is a question which we need not raise, for we ought rather to think of what we have already received at our Lord's hands. Himself is reward enough to the soul that hath him.

Matthew 19:28. And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Our Lord regards Peter as spokesman for them all, and he therefore answered them all: "Jesus said unto them ." Seeing their questioning state of mind, he begins with, "Verily I say unto you. " He condescendingly meets their somewhat selfish enquiry. They needed not to doubt but what there would be a large and full reward for those who had followed him. His first adherents would have high rank, and should sit as assessors with the great Judge in the day of his exaltation. Those who share his humiliation shall share his glory also.

When our Lord shall sit in the throne of his glory, all things will have been made new. That dispensation will be called the regeneration: then shall the highest honors among their fellows of the twelve tribes of Israel await the twelve who followed Jesus, even to the loss of all things.

Matthew 19:29. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

No man shall be a loser by the Lord Jesus in the long run. Every one that hath bravely forsaken the comforts of this life for Christ shall receive an hundredfold recompense. Our Lord makes up to the persecuted all that which they part with for his sake. Exiles for the truth have found a father and a brother in every Christian; a mother and a sister in every holy woman. Our Lord, by giving us his own love, and the love of our fellow-Christians, supplies a hundredfold compensation to those who have to leave wife or children for his sake In being entertained hospitably by loving brethren, saints in banishment have had their houses and lands in a sense restored to them. To be at home everywhere, is a great gain, even though for Christ's name's sake we should be exiled from our native shores. Above all, in God we have a hundredfold recompense for all that we can possibly lose for his cause; and then there is the eternal life given to us, which no mansions and estates could have procured for us. In faith of this we look forward to the reign of the saints, when even here they shall inherit the earth, and rejoice themselves in the abundance of peace. Beyond this, when time ceases, there remains endless bliss; for we shall inherit everlasting life. Oh, that we may never hesitate to be glad losers for Jesus!

They who lose all for Christ will find all in Christ, and receive all with Christ.

Matthew 19:30. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.

Thus our Lord sums up his deliverance as to rich men, and gives us the aphorism now before us, which he has already illustrated, and means to repeat further on in the sixteenth verse of the next chapter. Our King is here seen arranging human positions as they appear from his throne. To his eye, many first are last, and many last are first; and he will in his kingdom place men according to the divine order.