

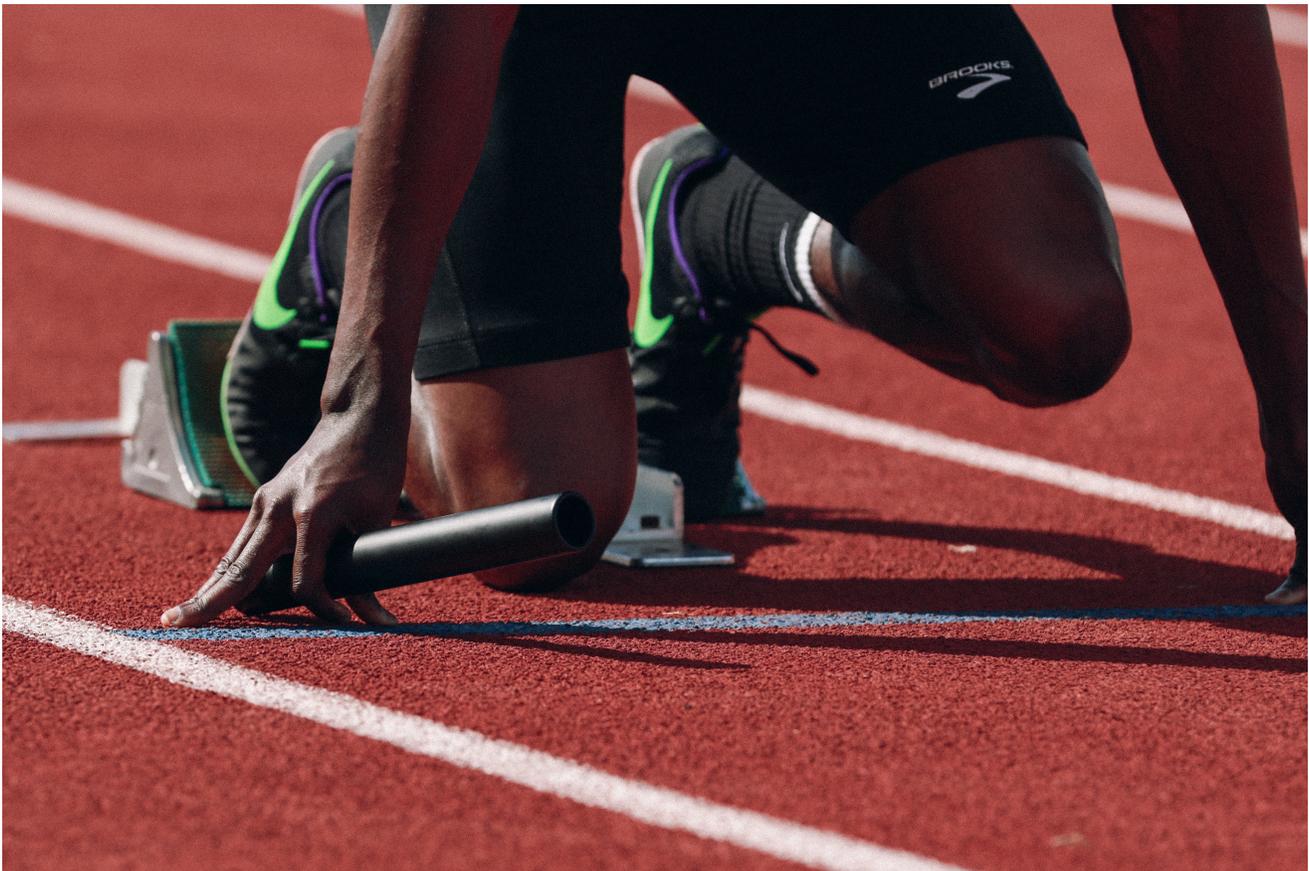
LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 19:1-30

To understand the difficulty of rich people entering the kingdom, and the problem of divorce.

Breaking the Impossible

Early in my life I discovered the joy of running. I had a difficult home life and a lot of anger as a young man, and I learned that whenever I was running, my mind would just sort of shut off. I didn't worry. I didn't stress. I would just put my eyes a little ahead of me, regulate my breathing, and run. I have always been fascinated by



the runner's will. Did you know that for a long time, running a mile in under four minutes was considered impossible? But then, in 1954, Roger Bannister ran the mile in 3 minutes and 59 seconds, setting a record that was thought to have been impossible. More shocking than that, Bannister's record was broken just 47 days later! Once people figured out that the sub-four-minute mile was possible, people started pulling it off more regularly. As it turns out, what was impossible was actually just really difficult.

In Matthew 19, Jesus addresses an impossible task; He teaches the disciples about the difficulty of a rich person entering into the kingdom of God. He says in verse 24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of

a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Legend says that there was a small gate in Jerusalem called, “the Needle’s Eye,” but there is no real evidence of this. The simplest answer is that Jesus was using an illustration that communicates the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom. The camel was one of the largest animals in Ancient Near East and the eye of a needle was one of the smallest openings. Jesus is conveying the idea that it will be very difficult for someone with wealth to live out the Gospel. Why? Because living it out requires *fully surrendering everything* (including material wealth) to Him and giving up control, an action difficult for someone who has accumulated many possessions (Matt. 19:16-22). But, impossible? Yes, and no. In fact, John Mark (as in, *The Gospel According to Mark*) likely came from a wealthy family. In Acts 12:12, his mother’s home is described as one with an outer gate and a servant, both features that only the wealthy could afford. The use of hyperbole here is striking, but Jesus gives hope at the end. Truthfully, what was thought to be impossible is actually impossible, but not just for the rich. It’s impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom in their own power, “but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

Divorce

Another one of the more polarizing passages in Matthew’s Gospel comes in this chapter, and it covers the topic of divorce. It is no secret that divorce is a big issue in the world today, particularly in the United States. The recent statistics show that 41% of all first marriages will end in divorce (with 60% of second marriages ending in divorce, and 73% of third marriages ending in divorce). It’s an issue that has affected nearly everyone in some capacity. Given the heightened awareness of the problem, passages like Matthew 19:3-9 stand out. There are some aspects of this passage that should be mentioned before any firm interpretation can be made. It’s helpful to think about divorce in a, “rule and exception to the rule” manner.

THE RULE

It is clear from examining God’s Word that divorce is not what God desires. Both Jesus (here in this passage) and the Apostle Paul (in Ephesians 5:31) appeal to creation by quoting Genesis 2:24 to show the purpose and the design of marriage. Marriage was God’s idea, and it pre-dates even sin itself. In fact, there are three distinct human institutions in the Scripture that God established: marriage, Israel, and the church. Of those three, only marriage exists prior to the fall. Marriage is a part of God’s design for His creation in a perfect reality, and one that, from the beginning, exists between one man and one woman. Stories like Hosea show that even in the face of adultery, marriage should be fought for and forgiveness should be given. The rule of marriage is that each partner should try and save their marriage at all costs.

THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

Some ministers have gone to such lengths to try and make the case that divorce is *never* permissible. That, because of God’s desire for the purity and longevity of marriage, there is no qualifying act that makes divorce ok. And that sounds nice. The problem, of course, is that the Lord Himself gives the exception to the rule. In verse 9, Jesus responds to the Pharisees: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The exception is, “immorality.” Adultery is the one excepting factor that would qualify as grounds for divorce.

THE CONTEXTUAL DEBATE

Of course, the other important aspect to consider is the context in which this discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees is happening. During this time, there was a rift in teachings between two major Rabbinic schools in what has come to be called, “The Shammai-Hillel Debate.” Shammai taught that divorce was permissible on the grounds of any serious transgression, while Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife

for nearly anything (even burning the toast!). With this context in mind, Jesus' teaching is actually a protective measure for women who faced the potential of being thrown out for anything trivial.

THE WIFE'S DILEMMA

Still, another aspect of this passage that presents some problems is not what was written but *about whom* it was written. This passage is explicitly regarding the grounds for a husband to leave his wife (adultery), and not the other way around. That is not to say that a woman doesn't have the same right as a man in the instance of adultery. However, there are unique problems that women face that men often do not. For example, what about a woman who is being beaten regularly by her husband? That scenario is not addressed. This passage is regarding the male leaving the female, and not the other way around, so these unique scenarios aren't even taken into consideration. Herein lies a major interpretive problem that is common in the Gospels and Acts.

DESCRIPTIVE OR PRESCRIPTIVE?

Both the Gospels and Acts are written as *descriptive* texts, meaning they merely describe the events and teachings of the people in the narratives. The converse of this is known as a *prescriptive* text, a text that is intended to prescribe something to the reader. An example of this would be Paul's epistles. Paul is intending in his letters to prescribe practices and truths to the readers, whereas Matthew is intending to describe something that took place to the reader. The prescriptive text intends a reaction and response to what is prescribed. A descriptive text does not. So when passages like Matthew 19:3-9 are interpreted, we can say for certain that adultery is grounds for divorce. That's what Jesus said. But is that the whole matter? Was this Jesus' comprehensive ruling on divorce? Of course not. The text doesn't indicate that at all. In fact, there is at least one other exception in the New Testament.

THE APOSTLE PAUL ON DESERTION

Paul deals with another issue regarding marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, and even this scenario is a very specific one. Paul is addressing what should happen if a husband or wife becomes a Christian but their spouse does not. In this event, they are unequally yoked, and Paul gives instruction regarding what they should do. While difficult, the two should remain married because the now believing spouse has the potential to influence the unbelieving one. However, he tells them in verse 15, "Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace." If the unbelieving spouse leaves, the other is free. So here, we see at least one other exception to the rule: desertion of an unbelieving spouse. Was Paul overriding Jesus' teaching? No, because Jesus' teaching is not meant to be taken as comprehensive. Neither is Paul's here (because he doesn't mention Jesus' exception clause). Both are unique to their context.

CONCLUSION

In both of these exceptions, there is one thing in common. Both of these instances break the, "leaving and cleaving and becoming one flesh," that Genesis 2:24 demands. But certainly other acts could qualify in that category as well (abuse, for example). So what are we to make of this? Is there no, "cut and dry" ruling on divorce? Unfortunately, no. The deeper issue of marriage and divorce always comes back to the place that all righteousness and sin come to: the heart. So, in the unfortunate instance of divorce, it should be approached with much care, prayer, and wisdom, and only after all options have been exhausted to save the marriage.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 19:1-2. Where did Jesus leave from and go to? Who was with him? What did He do?

2. Read Matthew 19:3-9. What were the Pharisees questioning Jesus about? What was Jesus' response? What was the context of this discussion? Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4. How does Jesus' teaching line up with this passage? Who would have been benefitted by Jesus' teaching?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 19:10-12. What is Jesus' point in His answer? Were the disciples right?
2. Read Matthew 19:13-15. Describe in your own words what happens in these verses. What does this say about the value of children in the eyes of Jesus?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 19:16-22. What is the dilemma of the rich young ruler? What has he done well? What has he lacked? What is his response to Jesus' command to sell his possessions? In your opinion, why?
2. Read Matthew 19:23-26. In your own words, describe what Jesus is teaching in this passage (Hint: see above).

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 19:27-30. What does it mean that, "the first will be last; and the last, first?"
2. Do a quick search of the word, "rich" in the New Testament. What picture does the New Testament paint regarding material wealth? Is it positive or negative?

Week 23 Discussion: Who's First?

In Matthew 19, Jesus makes the statement: "the first will be last; and the last, first." This challenges the worldly mindset. There is an echo of this in the next chapter, when Jesus says: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28). Talk as a group about this paradigm shift, and how it applies practically.

1. Icebreaker: In what area of your life are you in charge? How do you exercise your authority?
2. Has there ever been a time that you felt like someone was lording their power over you in your job? How did it make you feel? Did it inspire you to do better?
3. Has there ever been a time that you were served by your boss? How did that make you feel?
4. How do you think the, "last is first and the first is last," approach in a family dynamic would work? What are the pros and cons?
5. Why does lording power over others contradict the Christian faith? Who is really in control?
6. How can you put this into practice in your life today? Share with the group some steps you plan on taking immediately.

Takeaways:

1. It is impossible for anyone to come into the kingdom in their own power, but rich people face added difficulties because it is more difficult to surrender when you have much to surrender.
2. Divorce is not ever what God desires and every measure should be taken before it is considered. However, there are instances in which it is clearly permissible.

PRAYER REQUESTS: