

## Rediscovering Jesus in the Jewish Gospels

Matthew 19:1-12 Lesson 36

### Jesus Questioned about Divorce

“When Jesus had finished these sayings” (19:1), many teachings of Jesus occurred between Matthew chapters 18-19. According to *Wilmington’s Guide to the Bible*, in his *72 Steps from Glory to Glory*,<sup>i</sup> his chronology (Steps #48 and #49), lists these events and teachings as recorded in Luke 11:37-54. Key to the context of Matthew 19:1-12 is Jesus’ “sayings” which were a severe rebuke of the Pharisees and the Lawyers. Jesus is no longer in the north near Capernaum but had come “into the coasts of Judaea beyond Jordan” (19:1). He was now near the religious seat of power in Judea in Jerusalem where “The Jews” or national religious leadership were dominant. Not only were these leaders threatened because “great multitudes followed” Jesus, but He had just delivered His most scathing rebuke of their hypocrisy. His popularity and provocative condemnation stirred their attempt to trip Him up, “tempting him” (Matthew 19:3). Of all places, He had delivered this rebuke at a dinner hosted by the Pharisees. Hospitality aside, they derided their guest for omitting the hand washing tradition (Luke 11:38-40). He rebuked their omission of internal cleanliness and over-emphasis on washing.

“And the Lord said unto him, Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. Ye fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also?” (Luke 11:39)

Their nitpickiness of the seemingly insignificant doctrine of washing hands was a surface symptom of a deep spiritual malady “ravening and wickedness.” Jesus called them “fools.” The Greek - ἄφρων, *aphrōn* (as a negative particle) means properly *mindless*, that is, *stupid*, (by implication) *ignorant*, (specifically) *egotistic*.” (used 11 times in the N.T.)<sup>ii</sup> Example - “An instructor of the foolish” - ἄφρων (Romans 2:20). This is a different word than “thou fool” in Jesus’ prohibition of Matthew 5:22. The Greek – μωρός, *mo-ros* – is probably from the base of G3466; *dull* or *stupid* that is, *headless*<sup>iii</sup> (μωρός used 13 times in the N.T.) Example: “We *are* fools for Christ’s sake” (1 Corinthians 4:10). The Greek philosophers used a derogatory term for Paul and his Gospel – μωρός - *moron*; mentally deficient.<sup>iv</sup> He was not calling them μωρός or mentally defective. Jesus prohibition in Matthew 5 could be likened to a person being called a “mental retard” in English. To harshly mock one born mentally challenged μωρός was to be “in danger of hell fire.” Jesus was calling the lawyers and the Jews who were the instructors of the nation ἄφρων, because they needed instruction as they were ignorant of God’s priority of being clean on the inside and not just hand washing. They were ignoring or had forgotten the clear instruction of verses like Psalm 24:3,4 “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.” These religious leaders were the intellectually elite and yet they were “fools” in the sense that they knew but ignored the scriptures. It was even worse than Nicodemus “a teacher of Israel,” to whom Jesus said “knowest not these things?” (John 3:10). Lawyers should know the law.

“**Woe unto you, Pharisees!** for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: **Woe unto you, Pharisees!** for ye love the uppermost seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets. **Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** for ye are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over *them* are not aware *of them*.” (Luke 11:42-44)

The lawyers reacted negatively to this implication, prompting Jesus’ vehement rebuke.

“**Woe unto you also, ye lawyers!** for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers. **Woe unto you!** for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres... **Woe unto you, lawyers!** for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” (Luke 11:45)

They were boiling over with animosity after this rebuke.

**“And as he said these things unto them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to *urge him vehemently, and to provoke him* to speak of many things: Laying wait for him, and *seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him.*” (Luke 11:53,54)**

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him. (Matthew 19:3) They escalated the degree of doctrinal significance from clean hands to the sticky particulars of divorce. Perhaps it was these recently insulted lawyers who drafted up this tricky debate. These lawyers were scribes who interpreted the text of the law of Moses for the people of Israel. Jesus spoke of their authority, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat...All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do” (Matthew 23:2.3). They were the first-century descendants of the 70 elders that Moses chose to adjudicate (Numbers 11:16-25) When Jesus taught “there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by...” (Luke 5:17)

Divorce has always been a contentious subject due to the emotional, spiritual, and physical bond of marriage. No matter what position is taken it is likely to be viewed as either too strict and judgmental, therefore uncaring, or will be viewed as treating the God-ordained sanctity of holy matrimony frivolously. There could not be a better horn of a dilemma imposed by lawyers on this untrained rabbi with fisherman followers. Surely, this would be a checkmate to embarrass him in front of the multitudes. They were sure it would reveal his lack of qualifications to teach the laws of Moses. It would pit his teachings against their lenient Hillel school of thought and their parishioners many of whom had doubtless been influenced to allow divorce “for every cause.”

**THE BIG QUESTION: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? (19:3)**

**SCRIPTURAL ANSWER** “He answered and said, 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’” (Genesis 2:24).

**Marriage is God’s ordained institution and is the foundation of humanity, family, society, and nations.**

Jesus added to God’s commandment in Genesis. “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder”(19:6b). The Pharisees seized on what they saw as a slip-up. Did Jesus make an indefensible interpretation? He as the Word made flesh was not just giving commentary but revealing God’s inspired Word.

“They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?”

**Is divorce “Lawful” according to the Torah Law of Moses or not?**

Deuteronomy is the reiteration and summarization of the Law given at Sinai. It is like Moses’ commentary on Moses.

“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour 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. ” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

**Moses words - “some uncleanness in her”** “The Hebrew - `ervâh, *er-vaw*’ is from H6168; *nudity*, literally or figuratively (*disgrace, blemish*): - nakedness, shame, unclean (-ness).”<sup>v</sup>

**Pharisaic interpretation of “some uncleanness” and “for every cause”**

“In the first century of the present era the Schools of Shammai and Hillel took opposing views of Deuteronomy 24:1,

which allows a man to send his wife away 'if she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her.' The phrase 'unseemly thing' is literally nakedness of a thing,' which the school of Shammai explained to mean, 'a man may not divorce his wife unless he discovered her to be unfaithful to him. Talmudic law declared that a woman who committed adultery must be divorced" (Keth.3.5). The School of Hillel, on the other hand, understood the phrase in the sense of 'anything unseemly' and declared 'He may divorce her even if she spoil his cooking.' Rabbi, Akiba (Akiva) argued, 'He may divorce her even if he found another woman more beautiful than she' (Git.IX 10). The more lenient opinion of Akiva and the Hillelites prevailed as Jewish law. This accounts for the ruling which is never disputed in the Talmud: 'a woman may be divorced with or without her consent, but a man can only be divorced with his consent' (Jeb. XIV 1). Since the dissolution of marriage consisted of presentation by the husband, either in person or by an accredited agent, a bill of divorcement (called a Get) to the wife, this meant in actual practice the husband divorced the wife and the wife could not divorce the husband.' 'However, they devised a number of safeguards for the woman.'"<sup>vi</sup> The dissolution of marriage was not favored though sanctioned. It is referred to as covering the altar with tears.

"And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet *is* she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for *one* covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously." (Malachi 2:13-16)

"The words , 'He hateth putting away'" receives the comment from one Rabbi, 'If you hate (you wife) send her away'; but another explained them in this manner, 'Hated is he who send his wife away.'" <sup>vii</sup>

One safeguard against hasty divorce was the fact that it entailed the payment of the *Ketubah*, or marriage settlement, to which the wife is entitled. But if her conduct gave rise to scandal the husband was entitled to divorce her without paying the amount of the *Ketubah*."<sup>viii</sup> See Deuteronomy 22:13-22

Scandalous behavior of the wife could include:

- An uncovered head in public
- Conversing with all sorts of men
- Cursing his children in his presence
- A loud-voiced woman in the house so that the neighbors can hear it

**Courts also had the authority to enforce the granting of a divorce by an unwilling husband.** "The court may bring strong pressure to bear upon the husband until he says "I am willing to divorce my wife."

- If he refused to consummate the marriage (Keth XIII.5; Ned. XI.12).
- The woman could ask for divorce if his work was repugnant to her due to *Halacha* rules of uncleanness, [ie: undertaker, sewage worker, tanner].
- Inability or unwillingness to support her properly (Keth 77a).
- Certain illnesses - leprosy

**Examples of the court's defense of the husband's refusal to grant her a "Get."**

- He is exempt from paying the *Ketubah* if she is unwilling to move to Israel or seeks to move from Israel without his consent or if she deserts him (Keth 110b).

They had taken advantage of "for every cause" interpreted by them as any allowable reason for divorce.

**“Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away?”**

Jesus did not allow them to sit in judgment of others and ignore their own sin.

“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, 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 19:8,9).

God’s design from the beginning was that marriage be between one man and one woman for life. (Genesis 1:21-24)

God hates putting away “for every cause” frivolously or treacherously, except for adultery (Malachi 2:13-16).

Moses allowed it because of the sinful failings of man. (Matthew 19:8)

Jesus clarified God’s original intent. “Let no man put asunder.”

Jesus regarding God’s only exception, breaking of the marriage vow through unfaithfulness. “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery, whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” Deuteronomy 24:1-4 speaks of divorce for her immorality and prohibits the first husband “taking her again.” Numbers 5:18-27 gave a way to divine a false accusation of immorality from a false denial.

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

Jesus answer in (19:11,12) “All *men* cannot receive this saying,” is in reference to their last comment about remaining unmarried, and is not a statement of making an exception to either Moses’ law or His interpretation.

If it was intended to make allowances for divorce for some who just could not handle it, then the Pharisees could have expanded the debate of both sides of the Hillel and Shammai Schools of thought.

Since the majority ruling was that of the lenient Hillel School’s exceptions for divorce, no doubt more than a few of the Pharisees were divorced and remarried. They, however, dropped it. It may be that they were putting Jesus in an unpopular position on divorce to turn divorced Jewish adherents against Him. Their knife was a double-edged sword that cut their own unclean hearts. They apparently withdrew from the crowd, silenced in conviction. They had condemned Him of unclean hands. He had proven them to be of unclean hearts. The lawyers had been exposed as lawbreakers. The best Jewish lawyers of Judaism just had their case against Jesus thrown out of court.

It revealed the root issue “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3). Paul a former Pharisee later made the point “as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law,” “Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery?” (Romans 2:17,22) The Lawyers of the Law are not above The Law of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Wilmington’s Guide To The Bible, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois, 1984, P 311-317

<sup>ii</sup> Strongs Concordance

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Walter Bauers Greek English Lexicon of the N.T. and Other Early Christian Literature, Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, P 531

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Everyman’s Talmud, A. Cohen, Shoken Books, E.P. Dutton & Co. 1949, New York, P 167

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid p 168

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid 169