

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Lecture 14, Matthew 16-19

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This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Matthew. This is session 14 on Matthew 16-19.

I think because of my previous comment about rabbis being allowed to sit, they've given me a place to sit for this session.

We have now come to Matthew chapter 17, and we're talking about the transfiguration, where Jesus reveals his glory. He's just told his disciples that he's going to come in glory with his holy angels, an allusion there to Zechariah about the Lord God himself coming with his holy ones. But Jesus also said he was going to give a foretaste of that to some who were alive at that time.

And that's what we have in the transfiguration. There are in this passage a number of allusions to Moses and to the time when Moses was going up to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai. Jesus is on a mountain.

They waited for six days while the glory was on Sinai for six days in Exodus 24-16. There's a voice that says, hear him. Well, that's not too unusual.

But in the context of Moses' allusions, let me go back to Deuteronomy chapter 18 because people were expecting a prophet like Moses. That's why one person tried to make the walls of Jerusalem fall down, trying to echo Joshua or tried to make the Jordan part also trying to echo Joshua. They wanted to be like a new Moses, and they failed.

But Jesus, who fed the 5,000 in the wilderness, actually does act more like Moses in that way. Well, hear him could allude to Deuteronomy 18-15, where God says, I will raise up another prophet for you like Moses. Him you shall hear.

And this makes sense in a context where Moses and Elijah, who was also somebody who was evoking Moses in some aspects of his ministry, where Moses and Elijah are with Jesus, but Jesus is the one whom they're called to hear. Moses was transfigured by God's glory. We have other accounts from antiquity, normally Greek myths or sometimes Jewish legends about people many centuries before, or just made-up people, who glowed or like Zeus turned to lightning or something like that.

We have accounts like that in various stories. But the account with which all of Matthew's audience, or all of Matthew's core audience, in any case, would have

been familiar, was the biblical account of glowing with glory. And that was the account of Moses on the mountain.

Well, Moses was transfigured by God's glory. Here, Jesus is transfigured, but Jesus is addressing Moses and Elijah in verse 3. Jesus is greater than Moses. Jesus is, in fact, the glory that Moses saw.

Matthew doesn't develop that necessarily to the fullest extent that you have in the Gospel of John, even in the prologue, John 1:14 through 18, with a lot of Moses allusions there. But clearly, Jesus is greater than Moses in this passage. The disciples see that, and then they come down.

And in the next scene, we read about casting out a demon. Interestingly, the disciples who weren't with Jesus on the mountain had been trying to cast out a demon and had been unsuccessful. Even though Jesus had sent them out before, they had been healing the sick and driving out demons.

Here, the disciples couldn't cast it out. And Jesus tells them why. In verse 17, he speaks of them as unbelieving.

Verse 20, because your faith is so small. Now, that's not to say that that's always the reason that something doesn't happen. I know my wife and I have been through a number of miscarriages, and I believe our faith was actually stronger than some of the times when we have seen miracles.

But in this case, they were unable to do it because their faith was small. Mark associates it with prayerlessness. Matthew associates it with a more direct result, maybe, of prayerlessness.

But Jesus points out that if they had had just as much faith as a mustard seed, that could have moved mountains, like the mountain he had just been on. The issue then isn't how big our faith is, because they should have had enough faith even to move a mountain, even a little bit of faith. The issue is not so much how big our faith is.

The issue is how big is the God in whom is our faith. They should have recognized that the faithful God who was in Jesus' ministry was with them as Jesus' agents, and yet they weren't ready for this point. Some additional observations about this passage.

Jesus, when he's speaking of the unbelief, he speaks of a faithless and twisted generation. In that, he's evoking the language of Deuteronomy 32, verse 5, the Greek translation of that, where the wilderness generation was a crooked and twisted generation, using very similar language. The condition that's described here is similar to epilepsy.

However, epilepsy and spirit possession are explicitly distinguished in Matthew 4:24. In the Gospels, spirits can affect different things. The spirit can affect a woman being bent over, which isn't to say that's the only reason for a bad posture, thankfully for me. The spirits can affect other things.

Legion, the person was pretty much completely overrun. But in this case, the spirit can affect the nervous system, and it can have the same kind of effects as something else affecting the nervous system. So, it's not saying that everybody who has problems with their nervous system has a demon.

It's not saying that everybody who has problems being bent over has a demon. But in these particular cases, that was the case. So, it takes actually spiritual discernment often to know whether there's a spiritual dimension as well as a physical dimension to something.

Of course, if the spirit is speaking out and claiming to be something, then that probably gives you a clue. But in this case, it was just the spirit was just affecting the person in this way, and Jesus cast it out. Now, I'm going to skip a lot of what I have here because I was going to go on and talk about spirits and spirit possession if I hadn't done that in my introduction.

But since I did do that in my introduction, I'm going to go ahead to the last paragraph of Chapter 17, which is the paragraph about the temple tax. Someone asks Peter, well, does your teacher pay the temple tax? All adult Jewish males were to pay a half-shekel tax for the upkeep of the temple. That was not just in Judea and Galilee.

That was also in the Diaspora, the Mediterranean world, the Much of that money ended up being wasted, essentially. The temple had so much income that they just kept building this golden vine, and it just got longer and longer, making more and more branches every year on this golden vine to decorate the temple. Well, Jesus points out to Peter that really it's not necessary for him to pay it because, for instance, a prince is not going to pay tax to the rural household.

The prince would be exempt. Well, Jesus is the son of the temple's God, so technically he should be exempt. But for the sake of not scandalizing people, he didn't mind scandalizing or causing to stumble the religious leaders in Chapter 15.

They were arrogant, but for the sake of not causing people to stumble who didn't need to be caused to stumble, he said, it's all right, we can pay it. Well, the problem is Peter's not working as a fisherman. Jesus is not working as a carpenter.

Where are they going to get the money? Jesus says, well, you go somewhere, you get a fish, and the first fish you pull up, that's, you're going to find a coin in its mouth.

Well, presumably the coin was already in the fish's mouth even before Jesus told Peter where to get it. God is sovereign.

God had it planned in advance. Sometimes fish did swallow coins, and we have other stories of that. But it's interesting here that the focus is not on the miracle so much as the focus is on God's provision for the sake of not causing people to stumble.

Now, later on, we're going to hear about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, paying taxes, those things all need to be done. Even if we could make an argument, well, technically we should be exempt from this or that. We live within society, and we want to honor society as much as possible and work within it where we can.

So, I'm moving now to Acts 18 through 22, and again I'm focusing on some of the, I'm going to focus more on some details than others because you've already seen from the beginning that we don't really focus that much on each passage or it will take us a long time. In fact, we could go even deeper than we go and get into debates over Greek verbs and so on, but that would be a different kind of course than this. Matthew 18, we have another discourse of Jesus.

This is one of the shorter discourses, and this one addresses relationships in the kingdom. Chapter 18, verses 1 through 5, deals with the humility needed to enter the kingdom, and the dependence on God needed to enter. So, in a sense, it talks about the humble.

But in chapter 18, verses 6 through 10, it talks about causing the humble to stumble. That is, scandalizing or causing people to stumble who are just new believers or just young in their faith. They may be zealous, but they don't know much yet.

Woe to those who cause them to stumble. We need to nurture them. Verses 12 through 14, go after the lost sheep.

If somebody does stumble, you go after them. You don't just say, well, we'll get somebody else. And you have a similar story in Luke chapter 15, but the application here is different.

The context is different. Verses 15 through 20, when all else fails, sometimes, even though you want to bring people in, that's the whole focus of the context, sometimes church discipline is necessary. You don't want somebody going around violating the principles of the kingdom, not just because it's, well, for one thing, it's contagious, but for another thing, you don't want it because you don't want outsiders looking and saying, oh, that's how Christians live.

And then in verses 21 to 35, he returns to this focus on forgiveness and expands that in great detail, just as you have in the Lord's prayer, forgive us our debts as we also

forgive those who are indebted to us. This will elaborate on that idea in much more detail. Looking now at 18:1 through 5:18, 1 through 5, we have to be dependent like a child.

Humility was something that the rabbis emphasized. I already mentioned the story of the rabbi who let his mother step up on his back. Another rabbi was sure that he was right, and pretty much everybody else was sure that he was right, but he had to apologize to Rabban Gamaliel II, not because Gamaliel was right, but just because it was the right thing to do, to apologize, to humble oneself.

But most people still exalted rabbis above common people, and we'll see that issue in Matthew 23, where that has to be addressed in more detail. Jesus welcomes a child. He uses a child as a model.

Normally, people would use prominent people as models, but Jesus points us in a different direction. The greatest is the least, and that theme will come up in his teaching as well. You'll see it in chapter 20.

With the going after the sheep, a hundred was an average-sized flock, and if a shepherd would go after the sheep, and you see this also in Luke chapter 15 a shepherd would go after the sheep that was lost, what would happen to the other sheep in the meantime? Well, shepherds often would hang out with other shepherds, and their flocks would mingle together. You may remember Luke chapter 2, speaking of the shepherds watching over their flocks by night. Shepherds and other herders would spend time together, often in the Judean hills, and when they needed to separate their animals, they could do it sometimes with a flute call, or the sheep knew their voice.

They could simply call them and separate them from the other flocks. So, it's not like he's leaving, you know, going to look for the lost sheep means something wrong is going to happen to the other sheep. This would have been understood.

When we come to verses 15 through 20, I'm going to spend a bit more time here, because sometimes it's been misinterpreted and misapplied. When all else fails, well, sometimes you have to go to the person and reprove them. Point out to them their sin.

This is not something we do gleefully. We can remember what Paul says in Galatians 6.1. If you go to correct somebody for a fault, do it humbly, remembering that you have faults too, that all of us need correction at times, and Jewish wisdom heavily emphasizes, submitting to good correction. We need to listen to it, whether it's right or wrong, we can at least listen to it, and usually, we can learn from it.

But in this case, the standard Jewish practice of reproof is followed in verse 15. Jesus doesn't always disagree with his culture. There was a lot of wisdom already in Jewish culture.

Some of it came straight from scripture that God had already revealed. Some of it came from human experience that was just inculcated wisdom. In any case, it's the standard Jewish practice of reproof, elaborated later on by the rabbis.

It's also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. You go to the person privately first before bringing somebody else into it and before making it public, certainly. That's why it's so shocking that Paul in Galatians 2, says, I confronted Peter publicly in front of everybody.

You would normally do that only in extreme circumstances. And so, Galatians 2 is talking about an extreme circumstance. As far as Paul was concerned, the gospel was at stake.

Peter was trying to avoid causing anybody to stumble, but for Paul, this is something too important. Table fellowship across ethnic and cultural lines is a matter of the integrity of the gospel. But in any case, under normal circumstances, we reprove a person privately.

It also helps make sure you're not just acting in anger. So, verse 15, you talk with them privately. Then in verse 16, if they don't listen to you, you take somebody with you, maybe two people with you, so that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be confirmed.

Now, after Rome abolished capital punishment in Judea, the Pharisees developed an emphasis that made it so, well, God doesn't expect us to execute capital punishment anyway, because they made it very hard to execute anybody. Remember what I said about, you coming in, you find somebody holding a bloody knife, standing over a person who had just been killed, and you don't see the person in the act, it doesn't count. And even according to the Torah, you had to have two or three witnesses for anything, because people could make something up if they had something against someone.

In fact, you also have a Jewish story, the story of Susanna, where you had two witnesses who colluded to lie, to get around that. And that's why you needed to cross-examine witnesses, and Pharisees very heavily emphasized that, to make sure that they really had the same story. Well, here too, citing the biblical requirement from Deuteronomy 17 and Deuteronomy 19, Jesus says, you have to have witnesses, because if you're going to take it to another level, it can't be just your word against theirs.

We have to have somebody else who, you know, they were refusing to listen, they were refusing to change their ways. And then in verse 17, if they still don't listen, you bring it before the church, you bring it before the assembly of believers. Synagogues back then, you may remember, doubled as courts, they were community centers.

And so, people would bring things before the synagogue community, and elders would come to a decision. In the same way, the church has to do that. In the Diaspora, Roman law dealt with Roman offenses.

But if it was a local Jewish offense, if it was an offense against Jewish law, Romans didn't want to deal with that. You can remember Galio speaking in Acts 18:12 and following, Galio doesn't want to deal, as governor proconsul of Achaia, doesn't want to deal with things that are violations of Jewish law. He said you take care of that yourselves.

Jewish communities in the Diaspora, in the Roman world, were considered to be communities of resident aliens, whether in Corinth or Ephesus or anything else. And they were granted the right to deal with Jewish offenses in their own way. That's why Paul could be beaten, and received the 39 lashes five times.

The only way he could have pulled out of that was to withdraw from the Jewish community. But he continued to submit to it because he continued to identify with his community, his Jewish community. So, as long as people, even in the Diaspora, as long as people continued to maintain their Jewish identity, they were subject to Jewish discipline within the Jewish community.

Well, there were different levels of discipline, but the harshest level was excommunication. And sometimes coupled with execration, cursing. You can see that in 1 Corinthians 5:4 and 5, where Paul says, I've determined, hand this person over to Satan.

In chapter 6, verses 1 through 8, carrying on the idea of chapter 5, Paul talks about dealing with these things within your own community. Don't bring your dirty laundry before the world. This is an offense that can be dealt with in the church.

Deal with it in the church first. 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul also speaks of handing somebody over to Satan. You have execration tablets in antiquity.

You have, apparently, curses with excommunication. You have execrations against Satan in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The book of Jude says don't do that.

But the idea is that the harshest form of excommunication was putting the person out of the community. Some people have said, oh, that's only found in the later rabbis. And levels of discipline are only found in the later rabbis.

Well, it just shows they haven't read widely enough, because it's already found earlier than the New Testament in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, also, there were different levels of excommunication. The harshest was expelled from the community forever.

But they also had lesser ones, like being expelled for 30 days, and so on. Well, you look at 2 Thessalonians 3, verses 11 through 15. It's different.

Don't eat with the person, but still treat them as a brother. Don't treat them like here, as a tax-catheter and a Gentile. So, there were different levels of excommunication.

There are different levels of church discipline today. Not all are equally severe. Well, then Jesus goes on to say, in verse 18, I tell you the truth, amen, lego homine.

Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. There's some debate as to how far we should press the verb tenses here.

But if we press them as far as we can, and again, you can't always do that because people didn't always use verb tenses the way we do in Greek. But in any case, if you press them as far as they can, Jesus is saying, whatever you bind on earth will already have been bound in heaven. Whatever you lose on earth will have already been loosed in heaven.

In other words, you're simply acting on the authority of heaven when you follow these procedures. What is meant by binding and losing? Is he talking about binding demons? We talked about that earlier in chapter 12, verse 29. Is he talking about binding demons? Or is he talking about binding human devils, so to speak? He's talking about discipline, church discipline.

And the preceding context is church discipline. And if we hadn't been taught otherwise, what would it normally mean to bind someone literally? Well, it would mean tying them up. To lose them would be to let them go.

Josephus talks about binding and losing people, and Barry's talks about imprisoning people and releasing people. So here, it's probably still talking about church discipline in terms of disciplining people or releasing them from that. The context of verses 15 through 20, and really the whole chapter, is the context of relationships.

If your brother or sister sins against you, you go, you show them your fault, just between the two of you. If they listen, that's wonderful. You've won them over.

If they don't listen, take one or two others along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Well, and then you come to these verses. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

If two of you on earth agree about anything, for where two or three come together, well, who are the two or three? These would be the two or three that have just been mentioned in the previous context, two or three witnesses. So, in the flow of the context, and given the continuity of the two or three, it seems pretty clear that he's still talking about church discipline. Now, the two or three witnesses go back to Deuteronomy 17, verses 6 and 7. The witnesses are to be the first to stone the person.

Here it appears that the witnesses are to be the first to pray. So sometimes we are forced to practice church discipline. Only once, when I was a pastor, did we ever have to come close to doing it, and we didn't end up having to do it.

It's a very last resort. In that case, it was what the rest of us believed was gossip and slander. But those are extreme situations.

You try to avoid them, if at all possible, by going through these procedures, going to the person privately, and taking others with you. And just because you have a disagreement, it doesn't mean you have to have church discipline. But if it's something serious, then it has to be done.

Keep in mind, though, that in Corinth, you had a lot of people sinning. Paul disciplined only the most extreme cases. So, you don't do it more than necessary.

I've been in different kinds of churches. The congregation that I pastored, the people, I believe all the people were following the Lord. They were all believers, as far as I could tell.

But I've been an associate pastor in some congregations. Some of them really were fired up for the Lord, but there were somewhere there were people who didn't understand the way of salvation, even though we explained it until we explained it to them personally. There was one congregation where I was, where the senior pastor told me, as I was coming on, that probably half the people were living immoral lifestyles.

And there I saw my role more as, wow, this is great. I evangelize in the streets, now I get to do it in church directly. But in any case, we have different kinds of settings.

But in verse 20, Jesus is talking about two or three praying. And that doesn't mean that unless you have somebody else to pray with you, God won't hear your prayer.

But again, it's talking about the two or three he's just addressed, the two or three witnesses.

But he says, where there are two or three and they pray, well, I am in their midst. There was a similar rabbinic saying about the Shekinah, about God's presence. Where two or three are gathered for the study of the Torah, there is God's Shekinah, his presence among them.

And we mentioned that earlier in the course, that that's a characteristic of God alone. Later rabbis called him Makom, the place, the omnipresent one, the Septuagint and Philo speak of how God fills all of creation. And again, this is a theme that we have elsewhere in Matthew.

Matthew 1:23, Emmanuel, God with us. Matthew 28:20, I am with you until the end of the age. Jesus is clearly portrayed here as divine.

Well, Jesus has been talking about church discipline. And Peter therefore asks the question, well, how many times should I forgive? Seven. And of course, he thought that was pretty generous because forgiving even a few times was considered generous.

And seven times, that was far more generous than usual. But Jesus said 70 times seven. That doesn't mean that you count up to 490 and then you quit forgiving.

The point is, with Peter having said seven, the point is, well, it's far more than that. We can keep forgiving if the person keeps repenting. Although Jewish teachers did note that if somebody kept saying they repented and kept doing the same thing over again, the repentance probably wasn't running very deep.

But in any case, we don't bear the burden of being other people's judges. We don't need to carry that burden. That burden belongs to God.

We can let it go. We can forgive people and we can restore relationships where possible. And I've had to do that a number of times, give you one example earlier.

But it's so much better. We don't have to carry that burden with us. In any case, the king settled accounts with his servants here in 18:23.

Many Jewish parables spoke of God as a king, and that makes sense. But the king here is not a Judean king. The setting here is not a Judean setting, but it may be one with which Jesus hears would be familiar.

It's the kind of setting that Jewish people had lived under in nearby Alexandria in Egypt. During an earlier period when there was a Ptolemaic ruler, this ruler would

annually have an accounting with his tax farmers, the people who would go out and collect taxes for him. They would put up the money upfront, and then they would get the money back from the taxes.

That way he wouldn't lose anything. But in this case, he'd lost something. They could collect taxes at a profit, but they'd better pay the king what was due.

Well, after bad harvests, if the Nile didn't inundate enough or it inundated too much, then the normally fertile soil around the Nile didn't bear as much, and bad harvests, bad tax season. This may not be Egypt per se, but that provides the nearest likely fictitious backdrop for it. But in any case, this man owes the king 10,000 talents.

Now, if these were gold talents, that's major hyperbole. Gold talents, there was no kingdom in the world probably that had that much. It could have been silver talents, though.

Herod the Great's tax revenue was about 800 talents a year. Now, this is Herod the Great, who taxed people a lot and built a lot of magnificent buildings, not just in Jerusalem, but elsewhere. But his tax revenue was only 800 talents a year.

That's not even 10%. That's 8% of these 10,000 talents. 10,000 talents, at the average peasant's salary, was about 230,000 years' wages.

That would take a long time for a peasant to earn that much. Even assuming that the peasant didn't need to eat along the way. 10,000 was simply the largest number in Greek, myriad.

There wasn't a way to say a higher number unless you wanted to say 10,000s of 10,000s. What king would let somebody get so far in debt to him to begin with? Sometimes when parables burst the bonds of realism, they do so precisely to make a very important point. And of course, the point here is our sins put us in debt to an infinite God.

Our sins, therefore, are of infinite value because they're against an infinite God. And there's no way that we could ever pay back for that, even if we had a way to pay back for our sins. And God is under no obligation to forgive us.

The king says, to sell him and his family to repay the debt. The Jewish teachers prohibited selling one's family, but hey, this isn't a Jewish king. He wouldn't care anyway.

If the man were a very expensive slave, maybe he would be worth one talent. That would be the most you could get for selling this man as a slave. Often you would get 20 slaves per talent.

So, 10,000 talents, the king is still going to be out like 9,999 talents. The family isn't going to get much more. The family's going to altogether probably produce less income than the man himself.

So, this isn't really meant to be great math. Selling him wouldn't help repay the debt. But then again, if the king were really good at math, he wouldn't have let the man get 10,000 talents in debt to begin with.

But it might help the king's bad mood to have vengeance on this man. Well, the man cries out in verse 26, I'll repay you everything. Right.

That's not even possible. But the king shows mercy in verse 27. And in a culture that emphasized honor and shame.

Well, that was great. The king would develop a reputation for mercy by forgiving the man. But this man who receives mercy immediately goes out and abuses one of his fellow servants.

Somebody else also is a servant of the king. This other servant owes about one-millionth of what the first servant owes. In English, we might say he owes like 20 bucks as opposed to millions of dollars.

Well, he chokes the man. We know from ancient business documents that actually creditors sometimes did choke those who owed them money to encourage them to pay the money. The first servant actually puts the second servant in prison to make him pay back this little bit of money.

Well, not only is he imprisoning the man, but he's also keeping the other man from being able to work towards paying back his debt to the king that he might have. And the other servants are not happy about it. They say, look, this servant to whom you showed mercy is not showing mercy to our colleague.

Well, now the king's mercy is no longer bringing the king honor. Now it makes it look like the king has been gullible and stupid. Oh, I forgave this man and now he's going out and exploiting people in ways that he wouldn't have done if I had just sold him off as a slave.

And so, it looks bad for me. So, his first servant ends up in big trouble. He's going to be imprisoned until he can repay everything.

But of course, he has no means to repay. He doesn't have any more than he had before. No friends are going to help him out.

He's fallen from favor with the king and he's going to be tortured. And when is he going to get out? Well, he has no means to get the money. He's going to be tortured forever.

Of course, that bursts the bounds of realism again because kings can't torture people forever. But it warns us about something else. It warns us if our debt is infinite before God, it will never be repaid.

Now there's some people who say it's not fair. If God is a God of love, why would he judge people? Look at it this way. We wouldn't have life to begin with.

Everything we have is a gift from God. Life is a gift from God. The air we breathe is a gift from God.

The food we eat is a gift from God. Relationships, where they're positive, are a gift from God. Where they're not positive, somebody is not behaving the way God told us to behave.

But everything is a gift from God. And if we spurn God's gifts, then to be alienated from him forever is our choice. It's not because God has not been gracious to us.

It's not because God has not loved us. You look at Sodom and say, how could God judge Sodom? I mean, Sodom was really wicked, but you know, Sodom wouldn't have even been there if God hadn't used Abram to rescue Lot and the people of Sodom. And you know, you look at the flood, the judgment of the flood.

Well, those people wouldn't have even had life to begin with if God hadn't given life. I mean, the flood is like a reversal of many of the gifts of creation in Genesis 1. However, you take the rest of that language, it's teaching on judgment. The plagues in Egypt, what Egypt's prosperity had been given through Joseph centuries earlier.

So, whenever we look at the judgments, we need to remember that the judgments come only after much mercy has been shown, as in this case. When people reject whatever they know of God, and when people reject God's image in other people by how we treat other people, then we merit his judgment. But God is merciful.

He's ready to forgive. He's eager to forgive. He goes seeking the sinner.

And if we respond, we have his blessing. Well, forgiveness helps transition us to another aspect of relationships. When we talk about divorce, what are the grounds for divorce in God's law? In Mark, it's stated a little bit differently, but Matthew makes it very relevant for a debate among the Pharisees that was happening precisely in Jesus' day, and with which Matthew's audience may be a bit more familiar than Mark's probably predominantly Gentile audience.

Jesus summons disciples to work for God's ideals, Matthew 19, verses 4 through 6. And here's a principle that we have, that just as we're working for the kingdom, well, the kingdom is often a restoration of God's original purpose for humanity. And so we look back to the creation, we see what was God's purpose, what was God's design for us, how did God want us to treat one another, and so on. And Jesus appeals to that.

Well, the Pharisees were looking at Deuteronomy 24.1, and they were debating interpretations of that. Of the two schools of Pharisees, the dominant school was the school of the Shammaites, although they may not have been dominant on this particular question, for reasons I mentioned earlier. The Shammaites interpreted Deuteronomy 24.1, which says that a man can divorce his wife for any cause, any cause of uncleanness.

They laid the emphasis on the word uncleanness, and they said that a man can divorce his wife for unfaithfulness. If she sleeps with somebody other than her husband, or if she goes out in public with nude hair, it means that she's trying to find somebody to sleep with, even if she can't get it to happen. The Hillelites said that a man can divorce his wife for any cause because they took it as any matter of uncleanness or any matter of un-decency.

They laid the emphasis on the word any, so a man can divorce his wife for any cause, Mishneh Gittin 910, and also attested elsewhere in early Jewish literature. These traditions from these two schools of Pharisees probably pretty accurately represent what these two schools said in that period. They're not just random attributions, but these are carried on from those who actually were mostly descended from the school of Hillel.

But these two interpretations, one was obviously stricter, one was more lenient toward the man, and the Pharisees asked Jesus to weigh in, well, which group of Pharisees do you agree with on this question? Jesus circumvents their appeal to Deuteronomy 24.1 to begin with, by appealing instead to Genesis 2. Now, appealing to the creation narrative was not something unusual. There were others who understood the importance of that. The Dead Sea Scrolls used the creation narrative and appealed to that to prohibit royal polygamy, that is kings marrying multiple wives, like Solomon did.

But it was already prohibited in Deuteronomy 17, well, they applied Genesis 2 to that as well. Rabbis often subordinated women based on the Eve narrative. I don't agree with that interpretation, but in any case, Jesus appeals to the creation narrative, and they could have recognized that that was a legitimate hermeneutical approach.

These Pharisees, Jesus says, by contrast, interpret Scripture in a way that oppresses others unjustly. You know, some Old Testament laws, you know, the laws were good, they improved many things, but the laws were not meant to be God's ideal. You have the death penalty for certain things, sexual immorality, blasphemy, sorcery, Sabbath violation, and murder.

These are the kinds of things God obviously opposed. But there were other things where there was no death penalty attached. It didn't mean that God didn't care about these things.

Civil laws were meant to limit sin. They don't abolish sin. They raise the standard in the culture, but they can't take you to the highest ideal.

So you had things like the Old Testament laws that regulated divorce. They regulated polygamy. You couldn't marry a woman and her sister.

Some cultures allow that, but about half the cultures that do allow that, it works out badly. The sisters end up at odds, which is what happened with Rachel and Leah. You know, it didn't work very well in that culture.

So, there was a regulation of sorority polygamy. There was a regulation with the blood avenger, so you couldn't just randomly kill somebody. There were limits on that.

And there were limits on slavery, especially for fellow Israelites where it was indentured servanthood. They'd get land when they were done. But regulating sin is not the same thing as abolishing sin.

Jesus appeals to the ideal, the creation ideal, that goes beyond these things. We would appeal to that ideal to say that slavery is wrong. We would appeal to that ideal to say, well, a husband and a wife, you know, for full mutuality we want monogamy and so on.

Well, in the case of divorce, Jesus said that was never God's ideal for marriage in the beginning. The kingdom is meant to restore God's ideal. And Jesus says that Moses allowed this because of the hardness of your hearts.

In other words, it was a concession to human weakness. Well, the rabbis themselves sometimes recognized that things in the law were concessions to human weakness. So, they should have understood what he was arguing.

Whether they agreed with him or not, they should have understood that he was arguing from the Torah, just like they were trying to make their arguments from the

Torah. And he was arguing from higher ideals in the Torah than they were. Now, when Jesus does this, he's showing that they're oppressing people unjustly.

I told briefly the earlier story of the wife who came to the rabbis and begged them, please don't let my husband divorce me. And they said, there's nothing we can do. Jesus says that's hardness of heart, that we should work against unjust betrayal, certainly in something as intimate and as deeply promised as a marriage covenant, where a person has the right to expect faithfulness, a person has the right in that kind of relationship to expect that they're not going to be betrayed.

How can trust flourish when you can't have that kind of expectation? In that culture, a wife who was divorced had little economic recourse. If she could find another husband, that could take care of her. But most women did not have means of self-support.

In that culture also, in the case of a divorce, many children of the marriage went to the husband. So, this wife can be really badly treated, and Jesus is defending the person who's unjustly treated. And we know in many cultures, people are unjustly treated in a variety of ways.

In my wife's culture, often widows are taken advantage of, and relatives from the husband's side of the family will seize the property and put the widow out in the street. You have other kinds of injustice like that. And we need to preach against those things.

We need to make sure that the people in our congregations understand that they need to act justly. And that can even be a matter of church discipline, because not everybody in our churches, at least in many cultures, especially where it's popular to be a Christian, is actually a practicing Christian. In any case, Matthew makes an exception for the innocent party.

Jesus was defending people from being unjustly oppressed. He was not intending his words to be twisted so that they could be used the same way the law of Moses was used to oppress the innocent. Matthew is addressing the husband.

In Mark, it's put both ways, but Matthew addresses the husband because in Palestinian Jewish law, what was practiced in Judea and Galilee, it was really only the husband who could legally divorce. Now, that was among the Pharisees. If you had enough money, you could get around that.

But in ordinary circumstances, it was the husband who had the right to divorce. That was the only thing that was addressed in Deuteronomy 24, because that was the culture. But Jesus lists an exception.

He says, except for the cause of unfaithfulness, which was something the wife could do to the husband. That was a legal charge in the ancient world. Some people have tried to narrow it down to say, this is just referring to incestuous marriage.

If you were married to your sister, well, then that's an exception, because in Egypt, sometimes brothers and sisters married. Greeks allowed it for your half-sister. Jewish people didn't allow it either.

It's not very likely Jesus would have addressed that. Also, it's not very likely that it should be limited to that. Pornia means all sorts of things.

It means that only in very, very, very rare circumstances where the context specifically specifies that. Some say, well, it's just post-marital discovery of premarital sex because he doesn't use *morchaea*. He doesn't use adultery.

He uses *pornea*. But *pornea* wasn't a narrower term than *morchaea*. It was a broader term than *morchaea*.

It included adultery. For adultery, divorce was mandatory. So that was going to happen.

But a valid divorce, by definition, allows remarriage. So, the question was the validity of the divorce. If Jesus says you're not allowed to divorce except for the cause of the spouse's unfaithfulness, that's a legitimate exception.

Now, I'm not saying that if the spouse is unfaithful, you can't forgive. We just looked at forgiveness. I'm not saying that the marriage has to be broken up.

That was expected under Jewish law. It was expected under Roman law. But as Christians, we can forgive.

We can love. But there's a difference between forgiving and forcing a person to come back who doesn't want to come back. If the person leaves, we can't force them to stay.

So, some of these things are going to vary from one culture to another exactly how they work out. But he does make an exception for the innocent party. But again, forgiveness is a Christian virtue where it's possible to restore the marriage.

We want to do that. Well, the disciples say, hey, this is not a good idea. Because look, if a man can't divorce his wife, maybe it's better not to get married to begin with.

Because again, marriages were normally arranged by parents back then. And that didn't mean the children didn't have any input or any say in it, especially the man. The woman, it would depend on her age.

If it was a second marriage, of course, she'd have a lot of input. But while they were still young, the parents normally were the main movers in terms of arranging the marriage. And they said, well if we don't have an escape clause, if we can't end the marriage if it doesn't work out right, if we don't like the way it's going, it's better not to marry.

Because some people are going to end up in really hard situations. Jesus said, well, some people are better off single. Some people are better off not marrying.

Probably that was true of Jesus himself. I mean, you can't make an argument from silence. But some arguments from silence are more compelling than others.

Surely if Jesus was married, there'd be some mention of it in the Gospels. I mean, John the Baptist, again, probably his wife is not living in the wilderness with him. That would be the kind of thing ancient sources would normally mention.

So, some people were single. But Jesus uses a very shocking way to communicate this. Keep in mind that Jewish teachers considered being fruitful and multiplying a command.

And so, some of them said, well, you know, if a man isn't married by the age of 18 or 20, then he's like a murderer because he's not being fruitful and multiplying the image of God. And one rabbi was lecturing on that. And another rabbi rebuked him in the middle of it and said, you hypocrite, you're not married.

He said I can't help it. I love this study Torah too much. I don't have time to get married.

But actually, most rabbis wouldn't have agreed with that. Most rabbis said, well, like one rabbi, they said, how did you gain so much learning of the Torah? He said I married at the age of 16. So, I was freed from distraction earlier.

It was considered, that many of the rabbis considered marriage freeing one from sexual temptation and thus from distraction. But in any case, Jesus says it in a very shocking way. Some people are better off single and he uses the image of being a eunuch.

Now in royal courts, eunuchs might hold some high status, but most people, when they thought of eunuchs, weren't positive. And even for those in royal courts, I mean, you wouldn't want to speak against somebody in a royal court, but in the

Mediterranean world, when people spoke of eunuchs, they often made fun of them as half men. They were looked down upon.

And in Judaism, it was a horrible thing. The Talmud speaks of just something being unthinkable that somebody, as they're circumcising, accidentally cut off more than they're supposed to. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, a eunuch, a castrated male, could not enter the congregation of Israel.

And I think God made that rule so that they wouldn't make eunuchs out of people, the way that some other cultures did. They wouldn't castrate people. But Jesus says, there are people who are born eunuchs.

That's true. The people are born without the organ. There are people who are made eunuchs by other people.

Jewish people knew about that in other cultures. They knew about it in Persia, for example. And there are those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.

Well, as the story goes, origin took that literally, I mentioned earlier. But this is hyperbole. It's a graphic way of driving home the point.

And it certainly was quite graphic, because for Jewish people, it was such a horrible image. But the point is that some people, for the sake of the kingdom, stay single. John the Baptist did it.

Jesus did it. And I think we can say with a fair degree of certainty that Paul did it. Some people say, well, no, Paul must have been married to be a member of the Sanhedrin.

But Paul almost certainly was not a member of the Sanhedrin. He was a young man when he became a believer. And Acts 26:10, which is quoted in support of him being a member of the Sanhedrin, that he cast his vote was frequent figurative language in ancient sources, just meaning he approved of the decision.

And it's also a play on words because literally casting a vote is also casting a pebble. While the others were stoning, Stephen didn't throw any stones, but he cast his pebble in the sense that he was approving of what was done. And Jesus goes on to talk more about family.

In Matthew 19, verses 13 through 15, talks about children. Well, the disciples try to push the children away. The parents are bringing their little children to Jesus for him to bless them.

And, you know, blessing, well, you know, Isaac blessed Jacob, Abraham blessed Isaac. These parents want Jesus to give a blessing to their children. And the disciples try to push them away because the disciples are about the important business of the kingdom.

The disciples are about, you know, they're on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus is going to set up his kingdom. That's important.

And they miss what the kingdom is really about. It's just like the crowds who tried to silence the blind men in chapter 20 and verse 31 to keep them from getting to Jesus. Hey, Jesus has more important things.

He's on his way to Jerusalem to set up the kingdom. It echoes 2 Kings 4.27, where Gehazi tried to push the Shunammite woman away from Elisha. But Elisha says, no, let her alone.

And her prayer is answered. Well, in this case, the disciples are trying to protect Jesus. But what Jesus' kingdom was about was not going and overthrowing the Sadducees or slaughtering the Romans.

What Jesus' kingdom was about was stopping for some children, blessing the children, and meeting the needs of blind beggars. Jesus cared about the little people, cared about the marginalized people. And if we want to be close to his heart, that's what we need to care about too.

If that's what we are, that becomes fairly easy, I hope. If that's not what we are, we may get to know his heart best among the lowly and among the broken. He's going to go on to talk more about what it means to follow him with the cost of discipleship.

It's not being rich and powerful. It's caring for the poor and the lowly. We'll talk about that in the next lesson.

This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Matthew. This is session 14 on Matthew 16-19.