

CFM19 - Matthew 19–20; Mark 10; Luke 18 “What Lack I Yet?”

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The chapters of Matthew, Mark and Luke in this week’s lesson overlap. Each of them contains novel material, so it is worthwhile to compare the differences in a horizontal harmony.

While some of the vignettes are interrelated, they appears to be presented chronologically, as opposed them being driven by a single theme. Jesus is preparing for his imminent demise and these are events which transpired in his life.

### **The Importuning Widow (Luke 18:1-8)**

Even a corrupt judge will give in to a righteous cause for his own convenience, how much more will God establish righteousness for those who ask for it?

### **The Arrogant Pharisee and Humble Publican (Luke 18:9-14)**

The kingdom of Heaven isn’t about social standing or position, it is about arrogance and humility. Looking good doesn’t matter.

### **Marriage and Divorce, and “Eunuchs” Too (Matt. 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12)**

#### **Letter of the Law versus Spirit of the Law**

The Pharisees are hoping to catch Jesus in the Pharisaic mass of regulations about how to administer divorce in a Jewish community.

As an aside, shortly after Jesus’ time, circa 200 BC/CE, one particular Pharisee, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch/Prince, preserved the massive set of regulations as the Mishnah. Commentary on the Mishnah is called the Gemara. The Mishnah and Gemara together are combined into the Talmud. So the Talmud as we have it today was documented after Jesus’ time, but it is clear the regulations documented in the Talmud preceded it well before then. This set of Talmudic text was certainly present in a rough form during Jesus’ time.

The Nashim Gittim, or “Codes on Women, with Respect to Divorce”, can be seen at the links below:

<https://www.sefaria.org/Gittin?lang=bi>

<http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Gittin.pdf>

or you can search “seder mashim mishnah gittin” using online search tool to find the regulations on women with respect to divorce.

They are very complicated and nitpicking, which is exactly what the scholarly Pharisees love. The opening chapters of Gittin dwell on how to appropriately issue a “Get”, or a bill of divorcement. The middle chapters deal with all sorts of matters over how to deal with minors and disbursement of properties and all sorts of things. The closing chapters dwell on what justifies divorce.

Jesus is having none of it, and goes straight back to Moses to answer the question while dodging their bait. His implicit rejection of the Talmudic sages is notable here, as that is what underlies the Pharisaic attempt to ensnare Jesus.

Jesus’ comments in Matt. 19:9 and Mark 10:11-12 are him saying that you cannot skirt the spirit of the Law by obeying the letter of the Law. If you divorce your current spouse with the intent of marrying another one, then that is the same thing as adultery. Yes, you are obeying the letter of the Law, but you have already broken the spirit of the Law by wanting another person, rather than the one you have.

## **Divorce**

Jesus is also saying the only legitimate reason for divorce is “fornication.” The Greek term there is “porneia”, which is a catch-all term inclusive of premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, and any and all of that. Jesus is saying egregious infidelity in marriage is the grounds for divorce, and presumably before marriage as well, implying deceit in the betrothal process.

With respect for suing for divorce, note Mark’s account is gender inclusive where Matthew’s account is not.

Divorce today is messy, and it was just as messy then, if not worse. Back then, even during Jesus’ time, a man could have more than one wife, so why would he divorce a woman to get another? Property issues, business issues, family issues, all of that. In a time of arranged marriages, you have people who might not know each other well being put into complicated situations for reasons that are not immediately apparent.

Some commentators take Jesus’ statement on remarriage after divorce to be a categorical ban on all remarriage after divorce. I do not believe that is the case. The context here is the Pharisees trying to entrap Jesus in a legal argument over Rabbinic interpretation of the letter of the Law. Jesus is rejecting that approach. His intent is to point out the spirit of the Law, and reject the letter of the Law. Jesus is saying you cannot be justified in obeying the letter of the Law if you are breaking the spirit of it in the first place, and he uses the example of divorcing your current spouse so you can be with someone else you are already lusting after.

It is interesting to note that in all of the latter-day canon, there is no additional discussion or comment on divorce. Nothing.

### **Eunuchs**

The apostles say “If the relationship of a man and woman is like this, it is not good to marry.” Jesus says, “No, that is not the case for everyone, but it is the case for some.”

Some commentators see this as the apostles contradicting Gen. 2:18, because if they cannot enjoy the convenience of divorcing women at their leisure, then they’d rather not be married at all. I don’t read it as a general statement like that. I read it as a specific case, as the lead in in verse 10 says “If the case of the man be so with his wife” being a reference to the substance of v. 9, the specific case where a man is divorcing a wife not because of fornications, who is then marrying another. The apostles are saying it is better to be as a eunuch than to be an adulterer. Jesus does not disagree with them. It is better to deny oneself than to be an adulterer.

This is one of the only cases where Jesus is saying, “Look, life is messy, and things don’t always work out in the ideal situation.” Jesus is saying, sometimes people cannot marry, but that is not the rule for everyone, but for those who cannot, they can still be part of the kingdom.

Note that according to Mark (10:10), this is a private conversation between the apostles and Jesus, it is not part of a public discussion.

### **Blessing Little Children** (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17)

This is a rhetorical addendum to the preceding discussion on divorce and eunuchs. Jesus delights in blessing little children, which ideally come from a happy marriage, not an unrighteous divorce, and not from eunuchs.

Consider the imagery of Jesus embracing little children and blessing them, right after stiff-arming the Talmudic sages and rejecting the Pharisees.

Doctrinally, this counters the view that Jesus is imposing a requirement that his apostles and disciples be required to be “eunuchs” (e.g., Shaking Quakers, Roman Catholic Priests).

### **The Rich Young Ruler, contrasted with Apostles** (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30)

This is entitled the “Rich Young Ruler” because Matthew labels him “young” (Matt. 19:22, Luke labels him a “ruler” (Luke 18:18) and all of the authors comment on his obvious wealth.

Mark's account says Jesus loved the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21). It is likely Jesus was literally calling him to sell all of his earthly wealth and follow him as the apostles did. But, he couldn't tear himself away from his wealth. Even though he is clearly a good man, he cannot make the final commitment. Jesus' request is not without precedent, as this is what occurred with Elijah's call to Elisha to assume his prophetic mantle. Elisha was a wealthy man, and he abandoned it all for the prophetic calling. Jesus is extending the same call to the rich young ruler.

In contrast to the rich young ruler, the apostles will have great wealth in the Kingdom of Heaven, when those who have worldly wealth will be laid low.

### **Laborers in the Vineyard** (Matt. 20:1-16)

You aren't in it for the reward, and don't judge the kingdom of Heaven according to the ways of the world, otherwise you will be disappointed and rejected. Those who humbly accept what they are fairly offered will be first, while those who expect preferential treatment will be rejected.

### **Jesus Foretells Death and Resurrection** (Matt. 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34)

Jesus privately tells the apostles alone that he is about to be killed. They still don't get it though.

### **Seeking Status in the Kingdom** (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45)

Matthew's account has the mother of James and John asking where Mark has James and John asking.

Expectations are high that Jesus will establish his earthly kingdom imminently, so they are jockeying for position in the kingdom.

They just don't get it. They are still thinking about a worldly kingdom, where Jesus will be reestablishing Jerusalem as the national capital of Israel as a political, economic and military power, as it was under David.

Jesus takes the opportunity to tell them to not be like the worldly kingdoms, because the kingdom of heaven is the opposite of that.

### **Blind Bartimaeus** (Matt. 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43)

Bartimaeus calls him "Son of David", a phrase that is loaded with messianic implications, hence the people telling them to cut it out. This is stoking the heat of the people's expectations for Jesus as he walks into the Triumphal Entry just before Passover.