

Fly, O.T.T. and the Bee's Knees

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[0 : 00] Today we are continuing our study in the Gospel of Matthew. We've been working our way through this book and we've come to chapter 19. We're going to take a kind of broad look at this chapter today so we can read again just the very last two verses where Jesus said, everyone who's left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life but many who are first will be last and the last first. This is a fascinating chapter that Mike read to us and it's one which in many ways seems a million miles from life in Scotland in 2020. There's this controversy about divorce, there's this mention of eunuchs and there's this man who's sad because he's rich and in so many ways it seems to be a long way from our own lives today but what I hope we will see is that although that there's a lot in this chapter that does seem different to our culture the truth is there is so much that is exactly the same. In particular this chapter is setting before us three approaches to life and to religion that we still see around us today. Just take a drink for a moment. Excuse me. In summarizing these I was thinking about my headings and I had a bit of trouble with them and

I think I've probably come up with the three strangest sermon headings that I've ever had. They are being a bit fly, going OTT and trying to be the bee's knees. Now if English is not your first language and you're unfamiliar with these expressions I'll just explain them. To be fly is to be kind of sneaky. OTT stands for over the top which means kind of overreacting to situations and the bee's knees is an expression that basically means being really good and really impressive. So being a bit fly that's the Pharisees in verses three to nine. Going OTT that's the disciples in verses nine to fifteen and trying to be the bee's knees is the rich young man. What I hope I'll be able to show you is that we see these approaches all around us. It's also probably likely that we've all fallen into one of these ourselves but what I want to see most of all is that Jesus is brilliantly different to all of them. So first of all let's think about being a bit fly. What I mean by that is that it's the kind of behavior where you're trying to use or even manipulate your circumstances to achieve a selfish outcome. Basically it's asking the question what can I get away with and we see that in two ways in the Pharisees because it's evident in both the way they approach Jesus and it's also evident in the actual topic that they talk about. If you look at verse three you'll see that they've come up to

Jesus in order to test him and I think that even at a most basic level that's being a bit fly. They're coming up with what looks like a genuine question but that word tested is telling us that behind their apparently genuine question is a desire to catch him out and their motives are actually unhealthy. But beyond that and perhaps even ironically the question they raise is also revealing a kind of what can I get away with attitude. They ask a question about divorce and they say is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause and behind that question lay a difference of opinion among Jews in the New Testament. Back in the Old Testament Moses had spoken about divorce in Deuteronomy which was a book where he set out many laws and guidelines for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. It says when a man takes a wife and marries her if he finds no favor in his eyes because he's found some indecency in her and writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends it out of her house she departs out of his house and the difference of opinion arose over that phrase some indecency. Some of the

Pharisees said well that just refers to an act of sexual immorality and only that is justification for divorce. But others had a much broader opinion whereby some indecency was basically just anything that the guy didn't like so if the wife did something that upset the husband he could divorce her and historians say that sometimes that was something as tiny as cooking a bad dinner and that phrase finds no favor in her eyes was used by some as a justification to say well if you found a woman who was more beautiful than the wife you had you could get rid of the one you had and go for the more beautiful one. Now there were these two approaches we don't know for sure which approach the people who are speaking to Jesus had but I think it's probably the case much more likely to be the case that they had this broad view thinking that that they as men could just get rid of their wives on a whim because Jesus is very much trying to challenge that attitude in his response. There's two alarming things about these Pharisees these religious leaders in terms of their mindset. One is their awful attitude towards women they basically thought they could just dump one and go on to the next just whenever they felt like it and remember of course in those days it was only the man who could initiate the divorce the poor women were stuck.

The other thing though is their awful attitude to the law they're basically trying to stretch what Moses said in Deuteronomy as far as they possibly could and you'll notice that that they're quite fly in what they say and they said why did Moses command divorce but Moses never commanded it and Jesus rightly corrects them to say that he had allowed it but that was because of their hardness of heart. In both ways these religious leaders are being fly they're thinking what can I get away with. Now even though we live in a very different world today I think we still see exactly the same kind of behavior all around us. So the Pharisees were a bunch of men who wanted their needs met by women and but yet at the same time they did not want to be tied down by any commitment they wanted to be able to just go from one to the next if they felt like it. Does that still happen today? Of course it does and there's women who do the same towards men. More widely this attitude of stretching a law as far as you can thinking what can I get away with is a really common approach to life. It happened in lockdown people were kind of trying to stretch things as far as they possibly could. Did I go more than five miles from my house? Maybe?

[7 : 43] Maybe you did too. We maybe stretched it a wee bit, with greater or lesser degrees of seriousness. It happens in politics they're constant kind of ducking and diving. Just now this whole Brexit agreement will we change it? Can we change it? Will we not? What can we get away with? There's that kind of mindset and it happens at work. People want to stretch their time off, see what they can get away with, see if they can do things that they can't. But most seriously of it of all this mindset happens in relation to God and there are many people who want the privileges of being able to say oh yeah I've got God and I know he'll look after me but yet they don't want any commitment and they definitely don't want any inconvenience in their life as a result. And the consequence of that is that people might express an outward loyalty towards God. They might even come to church each week but in reality they're constantly thinking what can I get away with? Now sometimes that happens in a high-profile way and people you discover that people have all sorts of things going on in their lives that you didn't know they were there but I think it's something that in a hundred little ways we can all fall into. Whether that's how we treat our colleagues, how we interact with the opposite sex, how we manage our finances, how we advance our careers, how we protect our interests. It's so easy to think what can

I get away with? But it's a dangerous mindset and it's not how we want to approach our lives as Christians. And that's because it actually arises from one of the key characteristics of our sinful nature, the fact that humanity is broken. Our sinful nature manifests itself in the fact that we display a constant urge to get the thing that we don't have. And we often satisfy that urge by being a bit fly and it's not not a good way to behave. What I hope we are going to see is that Jesus is offering you something far better than an approach to life that involves being fly. Our second heading is going OTT, going over the top and there's two examples of that in this chapter and they're both displayed by the disciples. The first is in their response to the discussion on divorce. Now the more I think about what the disciples said, the more I actually become alarmed by their attitude. It's as though they're basically saying, okay

Jesus if you're saying we can't divorce our wife for any reason, I think if that's the case it's better off, you're better off not getting married. And that's displaying a reaction to Jesus' teaching that is an overreaction. It's over the top whereby they're basically saying, oh well in that case let's not get married at all. And of course that's ignoring the main thing that Jesus just said which was from the very beginning God established marriage as a blessing for humanity. So it looks like some of these disciples were your kind of typical 20-something-year-old bloke who was totally afraid of commitment. And it's an example of where you take the fear of a specific risk and you use that to just write off the whole thing. It's an overreaction. The disciples thought if there's these risks involved in marriage you are better off without it. And we can display the same over-the-top attitude in other parts of life as well. So a young professional like many of you are might see a job you want to go for and then think, oh but I might have a bad interview. I'm just not gonna apply at all.

A school leaver might say, well I might not be able to pass my exams at uni or I might not get on okay if I'm not at home with my parents. I'm just not gonna go. I'm not gonna do it. And a parent might see an inappropriate scene on a kid's TV program or a movie and then just ban telly all together. And it's the same in regard to our approach to our lives as Christians. We might think, well there's a risk that people are gonna see my faults and they're gonna judge me so I'm not gonna let anyone close to me. There's the risk that if I go to a Bible study or to the course that's dead, that Derek's doing, I might say the wrong thing, I might look stupid, I'm just not gonna go. And perhaps most of all for many of us there's the risk that Jesus might challenge us to admit that we've gone wrong. He might challenge us to change and our response might be, I'm not gonna let him anywhere near me. Our fear of something we don't like can often lead us to an over-the-top reaction which writes something off completely. So that's the first example in terms of how the disciples responded to the divorce discussion. The second example of being

OTT was how they treated the children. Parents were bringing their children to Jesus and the disciples were saying, no, no, no, keep him away. So it's almost ironic because in regard to divorce the disciples were over-the-top in the sense that they wanted to just shy away from responsibility. In terms of the children that over-the-top in fulfilling their responsibility and they're setting this really high security kind of defense all around Jesus, children are to be kept away and I'm sure their intentions were well intended. They no doubt thought that Jesus was far too important for for Christ's duty. But even if their actions were well intentioned they were completely over-the-top again and Jesus rightly corrects them. And again it's a common approach to life and it's a common approach to religion. We often overreact to situations and we can set the bar unnecessarily high and and over the years churches have been plagued with man-made rules and expectations that reflect neither the Bible nor the light of Christian prudence. And alongside rules that are sometimes over-the-top we can easily, like the disciples, think that certain groups of people should keep away if they don't fit into our own box of expectations. That might be different age groups whether it's young children, old people or whatever. It might be people from different backgrounds, people with different opinions, even people with a different appearance. And it's such an easy thing to do. If you have ever seen someone at church and a voice in your head is thought, what are they doing here?

[14 : 40] Then you've fallen into exactly the same trap as the disciples did. Often it's well-intentioned but almost always it's over-the-top. The disciples were OTT to think that marriage was better avoided and they were completely OTT to think that children should keep away. And we can fall into the same trap, we can write off something good because of the risk of something bad, we can write off a group of people because they don't fit into our expectations. And again this all comes from the fact that our nature is sinful, it's broken. These are all manifestations of the sinful nature and this what's been manifested here is the fact that we are constantly inclined to put ourselves in the place of God.

That's really one of the things that lies at the heart of sin. So we want to be the lawmaker, not God. So we set laws that are OTT and we want to be the judge. So we make things absolutely black and white and we put people into one box or the other. And in it all we are trying to maintain control and simultaneously it cuts us off from potential blessings and it excludes other people as well. And again what I hope we are going to see is that Jesus is offering you something far better than an approach to life that involves being OTT. Our third stage heading is trying to be the bees' knees and this was the rich young man. On the face of it he's got everything.

He's well off, he seems quite sensible, his life is squeaky clean. And even as he comes to Jesus I find it hard to know what his attitude is really like. Is he kind of arrogantly boasting about how great he is or is he sincerely trying to do the right thing? I actually don't know. But whether he's being arrogant or whether he's being sincere the fundamental problem is that it seems to be all about him. If you look at these verses I don't know how clearly you can see that but the pronoun I just seems to stand out. What must I do? All these I have kept. What do I still lack? This man is thinking about, his thinking is all about what he can do. And when Jesus goes on to challenge him about his possessions it's also clear that what he has is very important to him as well.

And it seems as though this man's approach to life is all about trying to be the bees' knees. And if you looked at him you'd think, yeah that's a guy, he's got it all, he's achieved it all, he's got every box tick, he's sorted. And even as he comes to Jesus and asks about eternal life his whole approach again is on what he can do. And again we see that all around us today. For all of us just now there's a massive pressure to have it all, to have the job, the house, the career, the family, the lifestyle. But there's also a massive pressure to get all of that yourself. So you need to stand on your own two feet, you need to reach the top, you need to make it on your own and you definitely don't want to make it look like you need somebody else's help. And on the other side of that coin is the fact that we don't want to show our weaknesses and we don't want other people to see our mistakes. And just like the other two, this again is an example of the effect that sin has had on humanity. Sin has given us this constant desire to be self-sufficient and to impress others. At the heart of humanity is the fact that God has made us and if he's our Creator we depend on him but sin is basically saying to our Creator, no we don't need you. We can do it on our own. And it's as though nowadays you're incomplete as a human unless you've proved yourself and proved your independence in some particular way.

Whether that's in sport or your education, your career, even your hobby, you'll hear people say, I have to do this. And if they don't then they've failed. There's this massive pressure to be completely self-sufficient and yet it's exhausting, it's relentless and it's unsustainable. And again Jesus is offering you something far better than an approach to life that involves being the bees, knees. So these are our three strange headings and there are three very common approaches to life. If you think about it these are all examples of putting ourselves in the first place. So the person who's being fly, they're trying to look after themselves at the expense of others. The person who is OTT is setting themselves up as the judge of the right course of action and looks down on everybody else. And the person who wants to be the bees' knees wants to be at the top, which inevitably means being better than everyone else. But there's two devastating consequences to these approaches to life. One is that they all cause people to get hurt. So the men who were jumping from one wife to the next were hurting women in the process. And if you were a woman in the first century who got divorced then the consequences could be devastating for you. The children who were told to keep away, they were at risk of being hurt. And even the rich young man was hurt but he hurt himself and even though he was the bees' knees he went away sad. So these all caused people to get hurt. The second consequence is that they all leave people empty. So the men who wanted to jump from one woman to the next were actually casting aside all the precious beauty of a lifelong marriage relationship. The disciples OTT ideas were potentially cutting themselves off from the blessings of being married and from the blessings of having children at the heart of their community. And the rich young man's possessions could do nothing to fill the hole that deep down he knew was in his life. And what I hope we can all see is that it is so easy for you and me to approach life in the same way and it's so easy for us to approach God in the same way. It's tempting to be a bit fly and to think what can I get away with. It's tempting to be OTT and even churches have shot themselves in the foot by doing that over the years. And it's tempting to try and make ourselves out to be the bees' knees and to be just that wee bit better than everyone else. If we do that it is highly likely that we will hurt ourselves or other people and it's absolutely guaranteed that it will leave us empty.

[21 : 48] As Jesus says, the many who are first will actually end up last. But the amazing thing about Jesus is that he is completely different to all of that. So instead of hurting people, Jesus wants to protect people. So you see that with the women. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that divorce was not part of God's original plan for marriage and for humanity and that divorcing a woman for any old reason and casting them aside is not acceptable. And in doing so Jesus is protecting the women. And they're showing these Pharisees who in those days had all the power in a patriarchal society. He's showing them you cannot treat women as though there's some commodity to be picked up and put down on a whim. Instead they are to be loved and cherished because they are made one with their husband. It's reminding us that running through the whole

Christian ethic of marriage and relationships is the constant warning. Don't ever dare treat the opposite sex as though they are this thing that you can do what you like with. We also see it with the Unix. So the disciples had said oh stuff marriage that's far too much commitment. Jesus says hold on a minute.

Not being able to get married is a lot harder than you think. Now it's important to remember that in Old Testament times pretty much everyone got married and often you didn't have a choice as to who you married or whether you wanted to get married at all. To be unmarried was generally quite rare and especially for a woman to be unmarried meant there was huge risks because you couldn't it was difficult to work and it was you didn't really have much of a place in society apart from the place that your husband gave you. So it was it was pretty uncommon for people not to be married in those days but one key group who weren't married were the Eunuchs. Now that term generally refers to officials in society who had been castrated and they were often in place in charge of a ruler or a king's consort of women. So I think the idea was that you had all these beautiful women who were there at the king's disposal and in charge of them you put a man who is not going to be attracted to them in the way that others would have been. Now again a kind of consort of women for a ruler seems very far removed from our world but of course exactly the same thing still exists you just find them in websites magazines and films and the only difference is that you don't have to be a king to exploit them. So a Eunuch would never get married they couldn't have children and Jesus explained some people have been made like that by others some have been born that way but some also choose that life of celibacy which doesn't necessarily involve any sort of physical change to their body. The point I want to highlight is that immediately after Jesus speaks about God's ideal that a man and a woman should be joined together in marriage for life he then states that for some people it is not that simple. And for these Eunuchs their interaction with the opposite sex was not straightforward at all it didn't fit the boy meets girl and they get married expectation that was the dominant thought in those days and so the disciples had just said we're better off not getting married which is as if to say well these Eunuchs have got it easy and Jesus says don't think for a second that it's easy for them. And what that's showing us is that Jesus knows that there are people who don't fit into the simple model of marriage and parenting and he wants to protect them. Now that doesn't mean that Jesus is saying that marriage and relationships can be anything because he's just said what God's model for that is that a man and a woman are to be united as one in marriage but he's also saying if people don't fit that don't be hard on them.

And that's a lesson that that we must all remember. And as always Jesus is such a brilliant example to us here because here you have the tension that you often find in life between the ideal and the reality. So Jesus is saying that God's ideal for a relationship is that a man and a woman should get married and they should stay together for life because they are now one. But Jesus also recognizes that for people for whom that's not worked out for people who have been divorced or for people who can't relate to the opposite sex in that way the reality of their lives is a long way from the ideal. Now we tend to react to that tension in two ways. We either reject the people and hold on to the ideal or we reject the ideal and hold on to the people. So often in some contexts and maybe the church has sometimes fallen to this category we hold on to the ideal but we've kept the people who don't conform at arms length which has left them feeling judged, isolated and rejected. The opposite option is what the world around us often does which is to say well we must abandon the ideal in order to keep favor with the people but the difficulty there is that people make up new ideals and anything becomes acceptable and eventually these these ideals come into conflict with one another. Jesus does neither of these things. He never rejects the ideal. He's totally committed to what God our

Creator has set out for us but he never rejects people either and that means that no matter what has happened in our relationships we can come to Jesus knowing that he will protect us and he will heal the bruises and the scars that we have. Jesus does not want to hurt these people. He wants to protect them.

[28 : 21] We see it with the children. The disciples have said don't come. Jesus has said no way bring them in and you have this beautiful scene of him laying his hands on them with all that amazing protective care and we also see it with this rich young man. Jesus doesn't want to hurt him. He wants to help him and protect him but the difficulty is that the thing that's hurting the man is the very thing that he can't let go of and how often is that true that we want to hold tight to something that's actually hurting us. So that might be a job that's consuming us. It might be social media attention that we can't live without. It might be a lifestyle that we can't really afford. It might be a fallout with a friend that we can't forgive. It might be a disappointment that we can't stop stewing over. Jesus is saying to us let it go and if we say I can't then just like this man we're going to walk away feeling sad and hurt. In all of these ways and in a thousand others Jesus wants to protect you and that's so powerfully shown in just a couple of chapters time when Jesus looks out over the city and and he says how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you are not willing. I really hope that in this passage you can see that Jesus has a deep burning instinct to protect you and that's because you are so precious to him and that is why you should listen to him. So instead of hurting people we see that Jesus wants to protect you but we also see that instead of leaving you empty Jesus wants to fill you to the brim and that brings us back to the verses that we read at the very start where he said everyone who's left houses brother sisters fathers mother children lands from my name's sake we'll receive a hundred fold and will inherit eternal life. Now over the years whenever I've read that verse I immediately think about all the stuff I might lose so you think about your house and your brothers your sisters your family your father your mother your children your land these are all things that we don't want to part with and what I always find is that when I read that verse I start thinking about those things as I start reading the second half of the verse and I stop paying attention to what Jesus is saying and I miss the main point that he's making because Jesus is not saying that if you want to become a Christian you need to abandon your loved ones he's not saying that at all what he is saying is that even if you did lose these things what you gain is a hundred times more.

Now that doesn't mean that you're gonna get a hundred mothers I would possibly risk falling into the category of being too much of a good thing. What it does mean though is that if we follow Jesus if you follow Jesus and the people around you don't come with you or if they think that you're crazy whether that's family friends partner Jesus is saying if that happens I will not leave you empty. In fact I will pour love and joy and friendship and community into you that's a hundred times more than anything you would have if you reject me and that's because Jesus's great goal is to fill you to the brim and this is something that that's so often people get wrong and that's people both in the church and outside the church. People think that you have this choice between a full life and being a Christian and that's based on the view that being a Christian is restrictive dull narrow-minded and burdensome and and maybe there are even have been Christians who've made it look like that. These verses are telling us that that is absolute rubbish because if you think about it what do you do with your house your brothers your sisters your father your mother your children your lands what do you do with them well with your house in our houses we spend time together we eat we talk we laugh we share Jesus says I want you to have a hundred times more of that. What do you do with brothers and sisters you grow together and you have adventures together Jesus says I want you to have a hundred times more of that. What do you do with father and mother and children you learn from them you lean on them you cry with them you get hugged by them

Jesus says I want you to have a hundred times more of that. What do you do with land you achieve things you work you invest you see fruit for your labors Jesus says I want you to have a hundred times more of all of that. Jesus is not saying cut yourself off from your family and be miserable he's saying I want you to come and follow me and I will fill you to the brim of all the brilliance of being alive but ultimately that's not going to happen right here and right now because ultimately that's for our future because because Jesus doesn't just want to give you a full life just now what he really wants to give you is an eternal full life that's why he speaks about the new world in just the previous verse he speaks about the new creation when he will return and restore all things and in that new world that Jesus is going to make if you are a Christian or if you become one then we will be together and our lives will be so full full of joy and peace and security and purpose and friendship and adventure and above all else it will be full of love love from God and love together with one another that will fill every void and heal every wound that lost or broken love has caused you here and all you have to do is put your trust in Jesus and follow him but you might ask the question well how can how can you know that you'll have all of this you think of what I'm saying here and I'm talking about a fullness of life that is amazing and you might think yourself what Thomas that's it's so easy to say that how am I supposed to know that I could have that if I follow Jesus well I think I can tell you how and why you can know this there's three reasons why you can know this number one because God is not fly so he is not gonna say one thing to you and do another he is never going to break a promise to you he is going to give you nothing but the honest truth of his word the second reason is because God is not OTT so he's not looking for the impossible or the complicated or the elite he has a simple message follow me and in fact he will give you everything that you need to do that the only thing that you have to come to God with is empty hands and thirdly God's not fly he's not OTT and he is not looking for people who are the bees knees never forget that you cannot do anything to impress God not because you're rubbish but because you're already a joy to him he loves you and he wants you and he cares for you and he knows every weakness and failing that you have and he's saying I will deal with all of that I just want you as my precious beloved child and that is why Jesus is so different that is why he is so amazing that is why Jesus is worth following and if you are not following Jesus yet I beg you in the name of God Almighty go for it amen let us pray

Father we thank you so much that you are not fly you are not OTT and you are not looking for people who are the bees knees sometimes we try to be these things and we are sorry for that but we thank you so much that we can come to you as we are and we just want to pray for everyone who has been hurt just by life and all that it can bring may we all just come to you today for healing amen