

Matthew 19:1-12 – “Marriage & Divorce” – Apr. 21, 2024

1. When our kids were small, I sometimes used to watch cartoons with them
 - a. It seemed that there was often an awareness that parents would be watching
 - b. Two levels of humour
 - i. One basic level for small kids
 - ii. One more sophisticated for the parents
 1. Nostalgia, etc.
2. The same things frequently happens in the Bible, where you have a straightforward account of something
 - a. Then we later see that in addition to the obvious meaning, this account also had a deeper significance
3. In the book of Matthew, there is a very significant theme of harmony and fulfillment with the OT
 - a. On top of the very direct references to OT passages and prophecies, there are more subtle themes as well
 - b. We’ve seen how Christ takes onto Himself the callings and the offices of the Old Testament people of God
 - c. Jesus Christ is the seed of Abraham that was promised, and as such He becomes wraps up in Himself the expectations of Israel
 - d. We’ve seen all through this gospel how Jesus has retraced the steps of the nation of Israel from the beginning

- i. He was born under very similar circumstances to Moses, He was tested out in the wilderness, He ascended a mountain to deliver the Law (Sermon on the Mount)
 - ii. We recently saw how on the Mount of Transfiguration Moses and Elijah step into the background when they are presented with the Greater Moses and the Greater Elijah
 - e. The gospel of Matthew is marked by 5 discourses, and each of these follow the path of the OT as well
 - i. Chs. 5-7 – Sermon on the Mount – Moses
 - ii. Ch. 10 – Missionary Discourse – Joshua
 - iii. Ch. 13 – Parabolic Discourse – Solomon
 - iv. Ch. 18 – Church Discourse – Elijah
 - v. Chs. 13-25 – Olivet Discourse – Jeremiah
 - f. This is all background information to see that we should not read the life of Jesus as though it’s a random grab bag of ethical principles in no particular order for no particular reason
 - i. Jesus is living out the life of Israel, but He is doing it as a faithful Son instead of as an unfaithful Son
- 4. V. 1-2 – *“Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.”*
 - a. V.1 shows that the discourse of Ch. 18, on the life of the church, is now done and as we move back to a narrative portion, we are transitioning

- b. We're moving from the Elijah phase to the Jeremiah phase, and thus a teaching on divorce makes sense
- c. Jeremiah's ministry happened after the Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been exiled by Assyria, and his job was to warn Judah to be faithful or God would divorce her as well
 - i. Jeremiah 3 uses the language of divorce very explicitly
 - ii. Jeremiah 3:6-10 says that God sent Israel a decree of divorce, and that the same would happen to Judah if she didn't repent of her idolatry and whoredom (cf. Isaiah 50:1)
- d. Now Jesus comes from Galilee and enters Judea (Judah) and the Pharisees try to corner Him on the issue of divorce
 - i. They likely don't understand the irony of the trap they're setting for themselves
 - ii. Just like Judah was conquered and exiled by the Babylonians after they didn't listen to Jeremiah, things are inching along to Jerusalem getting utterly destroyed by the Romans because these people are going to refuse to listen to Christ
 - iii. The divorce teaching here fits with the course of history
 - 1. By Matthew 24, Jesus is going to give a very detailed account of how this divorce is going to happen and how the end of the Old Covenant age is going to come to a catastrophic and very obvious end
 - a. There is a true bride of Christ among the Jewish people

- i. These are those who see that the promises of the old covenant point to Christ
 - ii. These are the Jews who receive Christ
 - iii. Those who reject Christ are those who ultimately reject the old covenant promises and these are the ones who are cut off and sent away
- 2. This truth should also be held together with what we learn from Hosea when he takes Gomer back, and Paul's language in Romans that the Jewish people will be grafted back in
 - a. The fact that God takes them back is not a violation of a text we're going to read later from Deuteronomy
 - b. In both cases, they come back in under renewed terms
 - i. Hosea buys his immoral wife back
 - ii. The grafting in of the Jewish people is not because God is going back to the types and shadows of the Old Covenant – they are grafted back in by faith. They come in the same way the rest of Christ's bride comes in – not by ethnicity but by living faith in Jesus Christ
 - e. But the fact that this bigger, more poetic theme is present does not alter the facts about human marriage and divorce – in fact it amplifies the significance of how we understand marriage and divorce when we see it in light of God's bigger purposes for redemption

5. V. 3 – *“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”*
 - a. This is the question that they’re trying to trap Jesus with
 - b. Remember that John the Baptist lost his head over his confrontation with Herod
 - i. John told Herod that his incestuous relationship was unlawful
 - c. Now by asking Jesus if a man can get rid of his wife for any reason, they are forcing Him to side with either Herod or John the Baptist
 - i. If He says a man can get rid of his wife for any cause, Herod is in the right and John was in the wrong, and Jesus and His followers look foolish
 - ii. If He says a man cannot get rid of his wife for any cause, then Jesus is siding with John and making himself an enemy of the political class
 - d. The question of divorce was a hotly debated issue even among the Pharisees
 - i. The debated text is Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – *“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, 3 and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD.”*
 1. What is meant by *“indecency”*

- ii. There were two parties
 - 1. Shammai (conservative) – a man may not divorce his wife unless he can show that she had been sexually immoral
 - 2. Hillel (liberal) – a man may divorce his wife *“even if she spoiled a dish for him”*
 - a. Rabbi Akiba – *“[he may divorce her] even if he found another fairer than she”*
- e. So the trap is set – no matter how Jesus answers, He is going to alienate a large group of people in an already volatile situation
- 6. VV.4-6 – *“He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”*
 - a. Christ is the perfect interpreter of Scripture, because He is God, so these are His own words, after all
 - i. Despite the emphasis some have on *“red letter Christianity”*, the black letters are every bit as much the words of Jesus as the red letters are
 - ii. So when Jesus quotes Moses, in a very real way, He is quoting Himself
 - b. Christ answers this question properly – he doesn’t merely answer their question, but He shows His work
 - c. He goes back to the Bible and explains positively what marriage is before He answers their particular question

- d. Jesus goes to the origin of marriage in Genesis 2.
 - i. For all those who say that “Jesus never mentions homosexuality”, they are mistaken
 - ii. Jesus mentions it many times in the Torah through Moses, He mentions it in Romans and Corinthians through Paul, and here He positively affirms the goodness of His creation from the start
 - iii. God made us male and female
 - 1. Both equal and glorious
 - 2. Yet each glorious in their own way
 - 3. God made a world of difference and complementarity
 - 4. A one-man, one-woman marriage is the only kind that exists
 - a. There’s a distinction that must be made in this text between “lawful” and “legal”
 - b. All kinds of perverse and unnatural arrangements are legally recognized in the law of our land, just as no-fault divorce is legal today just as it was in Jesus’s time
 - c. These arrangements may be legal, but they are absolutely unlawful
 - i. Lawfulness has to do with God’s law
 - ii. The only kind of marriage that lawfully exists, or actually exists is a marriage between one man and one woman

- iii. God has not given permission to civil rulers to
redefine marriage or divorce
- iv. So “legal” has to do with what civil government
allows, and “lawful” has to do with what God
allows
- d. Jesus says that male and female are the pattern from the
beginning; this is by design
- e. Then a man leaves his father and mother and holds fast to
his wife
 - i. The emphasis here is on the man leaving because he
is the one who is responsible to be head of the new
family that God has created
- f. These two become one flesh
 - i. This is a reference to the sexual union that is only
possible in a one-man, one-woman marriage
 - ii. Sodomy and lesbianism offer unnatural distortions
of the one-flesh union, but this is like vandalism as
opposed to art
 - iii. Male and female are meant to fit together in terms
character, emotions, reproduction, anatomy, and in
terms of our basic nature

1. Male and female are different not only in terms of function, but also in terms of our basic natures
- g. So male and female are designed for one another, and then as God covenants a particular man to a particular woman in marriage, the sign and seal of this covenant is the one flesh sexual union
5. God has done this – He has created a new reality in marriage
 - a. Keith Warkentin and Cara-Mae Giesbrecht became “the Warkentins” at their wedding
 - b. A new reality was created by God and recognized by man at that moment
 - c. Because this is a work of God, it should be celebrated, enjoyed, and promoted
 - i. It should not be destroyed or undone
7. VV.7, 8 – *“They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away? He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.”*
 - a. There is a very deceptive “sleight of hand” happening here
 - b. People who are trying to manipulate a situation frequently change and adjust language to bend the conversation in their favour
 - c. Here the Pharisees say that Moses “commanded” the certificate of divorce
 - d. But Moses never commanded divorce

- i. He permitted it as a concession that we live in a fallen world with sinful, hardened hearts
- e. There is a view of marriage called the “Permanence View” which has been held by some in church history
 - i. No divorce under any circumstances (only permissible during betrothal)
- f. “Semi-Permanence View”
 - i. Divorce for biblical conditions but no remarriage
- g. “No-Fault Divorce”
 - i. Our legal practice today
- h. Jesus is saying here that divorce is permissible under very specific criteria, but that this is only because we live in a fallen world where sin has hardened hearts
 - i. Divorce is not part of the design
- i. Like many things in history, God’s purposes are to gradually put them away
 - i. It took many years to move away from polygamy which was also prevalent in the OT but contrary to creation
 - ii. Spurgeon notes that Moses’ law was designed to do the same thing with divorce – move them from their current practice back to the design in stages as true religion was to spread among the people, until it would die out entirely
 - iii. In history, we see how the spread of the gospel does make very real changes in our customs

1. As paganism spreads, sexual license and mobility are practiced, divorce is prevalent, families become small, and there is an overall lack of productivity
 2. As the gospel goes out, marriage is valued, sexual immorality is stigmatized, reduced, and pushed underground, divorce shrinks back, and a fruitful harvest of children and productivity show up
 - a. Almost always this is a gradual shift in customs, and not overnight
8. V.9 – “*And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.*”
- a. Christ gives the clause for which divorce is permissible and lawful – sexual immorality
 - b. The Greek word here is *porneia*
 - i. This certainly includes the physical act of adultery, but is also broader than that
 - ii. There are other manifestations of sexual immorality that can become so destructive that they destroy the marriage covenant in a manner similar to the physical act
 - iii. For example, if a man develops an addiction to porn use, this can get to a point of violating his wife that severely undermines their marriage
 - c. In 1 Corinthians 7:15 Paul adds desertion by an unbeliever as an acceptable grounds for divorce as well

- i. Some have made further application of this to include a spouse who does something that would have been deserving of capital punishment
 - ii. For example, does a woman have to stay married to a serial murderer?
 - iii. There may be forms of desertion where the deserting party does make occasional appearances at home too
- d. but we need to be very, very careful when making application of these clauses that it's actual application and not looking for a loophole as the school of Hillel was looking for
 - i. otherwise we more or less end up at no-fault divorce
- e. this is a reminder to look faithfully at what Christ says here
 - i. divorce is permissible under very specific conditions, but is in no way commanded, since any divorce, even a lawful one, is an undoing of something good
- f. the "hardness of heart" in v.8 isn't necessarily just referring to the heart of the guilty party
 - i. there is no requirement for divorce, even after adultery
 - ii. Christ's last sermon was about repentance and forgiveness
 1. The offended party must forgive if the guilty party repents, but this doesn't necessarily mean taking the guilty party back
 2. Sproul – *"Sometimes, of course, when a man commits adultery and the wife learns of it, he falls on his knees, cries, and begs for her forgiveness. Does she have to stay married to him? I do not think so. But he has repented, and as we saw in the previous chapter,*

Jesus wants His people to be forgiving (Matt. 18:35). So, if the husband repents, she has to forgive him. If he commits adultery seventy times seven and repents seventy times seven, she has to forgive him and receive him as a brother in Christ. However, forgiving him does not mean that she has to remain married to him.”

- iii. If the guilty party is repentant, there is no reason why the marriage can't be saved, however
 - 1. This would be the best case scenario
 - a. Genuine repentance, genuine forgiveness, and the marriage is saved
 - 2. What Moses does is merely to grant that this will not be possible in all cases, which is a far cry from commanding divorce
- g. One more thing must be said here given the time we live in
 - i. God takes us where we are, and not where we should have been
 - ii. V.9 acknowledges that even if an unlawful divorce happened, and the guilty party therefore enters unlawfully into another marriage, Jesus still sees it as a marriage
 - iii. The OT law is clear that this new marriage shouldn't be broken apart for the person to go back to their first spouse
 - 1. Adding yet another divorce makes the situation worse, not better
 - iv. So even if things happened unlawfully, God stands ready to forgive, and then He honours where we are today

- v. The reason this is important to recognize in our day is because of this
 - 1. Some Christians have already started to advocate for a similar approach to those who have entered into same-sex relationships that have legal standing with the government
 - a. But this is a different type of question, because these types of relationships fundamentally alter male, female, and the meaning of marriage
 - b. These relationships are incapable of producing a one-flesh union, and they are incapable of becoming marriage
 - c. They are also incapable of ever becoming sanctified or permissible
 - d. In v.9 Jesus recognizes that even if a divorce and remarriage happened unlawfully, it is still marriage and it should now be left as-is
 - e. If a hypothetical same-sex couple came to Christ and were converted, one of their first actions must be to separate
 - i. Their arrangement cannot be sanctified – it must be abandoned altogether (Rosaria Butterfield)
- 9. VV.10-12 – *“The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who*

have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

- a. Easy divorce made for cheap marriage
- b. But now Jesus has just taught something which just made marriage much more expensive, but also that much more valuable
- c. This is such a contrast to their no-fault divorce culture that they basically say *“well, it’s better not to marry if marriage is for life!”*
- d. Jesus responds by saying that the idea that it’s better not to marry is not for everyone
 - i. Celibacy is indeed God’s calling for some, but the overall norm remains marriage
 - ii. Marriage and childrearing remains the default setting unless God has specifically called someone to celibacy
 1. This is what was shown and instructed at creation, and the continuance of the world actually depends on it
 2. The intentional delay of marriage in our day is a symptom of a sick culture that no longer sees what marriage is for, that no longer has a robust theology of children and succession, and that isn’t grasping a clear vision of the future
 - iii. This doesn’t mean that celibacy is bad – for those who are called to this life, they are indeed leveraging their situation to the glory of God and the advance of His kingdom in a different way
- e. Jesus gives a few examples of those who are called this way

- i. Eunuchs from birth – those who are physically incapable of marriage or of having a family
- ii. Eunuchs made by men – those who were physically castrated. This was fairly common. Many slaves who were to look after the household were castrated in order to prevent sexual desire for the women of the household.
- iii. Eunuchs made by themselves – most likely these aren't physically castrated people, but intentionally celibate people. And these people aren't avoiding marriage because it's hard work. They have been called to a life of singleness by God for the purpose of serving the kingdom.
 - 1. Perhaps a dangerous or difficult missions situation that is better served by a single man.
 - 2. Perhaps a unique ministry that is better served by a woman without children of her own.
 - 3. Mandatory celibacy as practiced by some is a seedbed of sin and abuse
 - a. This is calling that is rare – it cannot be received by everyone, but “*only those to whom it is given*”
- f. Jesus end this section with a charge – “*Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.*”
 - i. There may be several hard things in view
 - 1. The calling of celibacy may be hard
 - 2. But given the overall thrust of the passage, it also has application to the despair in the disciples saying that it's better not to marry

- a. Marriage is the norm, and it is difficult, but it is worth it!
- b. If you are called to marriage, as most of us are, seeing your way through the challenges and towards a positive vision is also hard, and to be received by those who are called to it

10. SUMMARY

- a. Marriage is the first human institution that God created, and it was very good
 - i. It is the foundation of children, of the household, productive work, the economy, and the discipleship of the next generation of believers
- b. Due to sin in the world, the marriage covenant can be strained, sometimes severely
 - i. This is an opportunity to press in deeper to the grace and the provision of the Lord to supply our needs and to refocus our thoughts and affections on what marriage is intended to do
 - 1. How it is beneficial for the world
 - 2. How it communicates God's relationship to those who are truly in covenant with Him
- c. in the most severe cases, sin damages the marriage covenant so powerfully that it becomes undone, such as in the case of sexual immorality (porneia)
 - i. while the goal here too is forgiveness, reconciliation, and saving the marriage this will not always happen
 - ii. the offended party is lawfully permitted to divorce the offending party
 - 1. in the case of an innocent party in a lawful divorce, Paul says they are free, meaning remarriage is also lawful

- d. those who have divorced unlawfully or who are the guilty party in a lawful divorce are not permitted to marry again – they commit adultery if they enter into another marriage
 - i. nevertheless, in the complexity of a fallen world, it is right to recognize the situation as it is rather than add further complexity by trying to unbake the cake
 - ii. just because a marriage was entered into unlawfully doesn't mean it stays that way
 - 1. Jesus recognizes it as a true marriage that can and should be sanctified
- e. Lastly, celibacy is a calling for some that should not be made mandatory
 - i. Celibacy is hard, and guarding our marriages is hard
 - ii. But those who are to receive these callings must receive them, and the Lord will provide

11. CHARGE

- a. *Like Jeremiah, Jesus is warning the people of Judea about divorce. In the time of Christ, this is an exceptionally charged issue due both to the controversy between Herod and John the Baptist and to the different schools of thought among the Jewish leaders. Jesus is not content to merely answer the question as asked, but takes the opportunity to go back to the Bible, back to God's original plan at creation and affirm the beauty, truth, and goodness of a lifelong one-man, one-woman, one-flesh bond. Marriage is under attack again, being assailed by the lies of feminism, sexual freedom, comfort, self-centredness, and ease. As always, the*

people of God are presented with the choice between the spirit of the age and the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth is able to sanctify us no matter where we've been, and He shows us that marriage is good, that it is worth the cost, and that it is a fitting picture of how God began His creation and how He will gloriously consummate it at the return of His Son.

12. BENEDICTION

- a. *2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17 – “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”*