

# Family Matters

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.*

*(Genesis 1:27 ESV)*

*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

*(Proverbs 22:6 ESV)*

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,  
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

*(Matthew 10:37 ESV)*

*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household,  
he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

*(1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)*

## **Divorce And Remarriage**

**October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Matthew 19:1-9**

**Rev. Paul Carter**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 19:1-9; that's on page 824 in your pew Bibles. Now we read this passage a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about singleness and celibacy. In this chapter Jesus is asked a question about divorce and the answer he gives is so demanding that his disciples suggested that it might be better never to get married at all and that led to the conversation about celibacy. So a couple of weeks ago we talked about marriage and celibacy – this week we are zooming in on what Jesus says about divorce. We have a lot of ground to cover so I want to get right into it. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

1 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.

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 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." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 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. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (Matthew 19:1-9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In terms of context, you should know that in Jesus' day divorce was very common within Judaism. Even the Pharisees – the strict, legalistic Pharisees – had a very relaxed attitude towards divorce. Josephus – the best known Pharisee outside the text of the Bible – was himself a divorced man and he says in his famous book *The Antiquities Of The Jews* that he believed that a man was permitted to divorce his wife “for any reason whatsoever”.<sup>1</sup> That was the attitude of the day and that is why the disciples of Jesus were so shocked. When they heard this teaching, they said, “if that’s how it is then maybe it would be better to never get married at all!” Jesus is setting a very high bar here. He says that the design and intention of God is for every marriage to be permanent in its duration. What God has joined together let not man separate.

That is the will of God and that is the teaching of the Bible – Old Testament and New - but because of sin – because of the hardness of hearts, the Bible does concede that there are some circumstances in which it is not sinful to pursue a divorce and it is those circumstances that we turn our attention today.

## 1. What Does The Bible Say About The Permissible Grounds For Divorce?

Jesus mentions only one permissible grounds for divorce in this passage. He says in verse 9:

I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9 ESV)

Jesus says, “If you are divorcing your wife in order to marry some younger woman you are committing adultery. You can dress it up all you like – that’s what you are doing.” He mentions only once exception to this general rule: the issue of sexual immorality. He uses the Greek word *pornea* which the BDAG Greek Dictionary defines as: “various kinds of unsanctioned sexual intercourse”. That is the only permissible grounds for divorce that Jesus mentions:

### i. Unlawful sexual intercourse

---

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews IV*, 253 (viii. 23) as cited in D.A. Carson, *Matthew Chapters 13-28 The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 411.

The dictionary provides a sample list of what would constitute “Unlawful Sexual Intercourse”. Under that category we could mention the following:

- Adultery
- Fornication (sex with a prostitute)
- Homosexuality
- Bestiality
- Incest

All of those things can be assumed as included under Jesus’ use of the word *pornea* in Matthew 19. If your spouse has engaged in any of those things then you are PERMITTED to consider formally terminating your marriage.

That is the only legitimate grounds for divorce mentioned here by Jesus but there is an additional reason mentioned by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Let’s look at that; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 – that’s on page 955 in your pew Bible. Now while you look that up let me just answer a question that you are probably asking: Are Apostles permitted to add to the commandments of Jesus? Jesus only provided 1 permissible grounds for divorce – is it appropriate for an Apostle to add another? And the answer, actually, yes. Jesus told his Apostles that they would do this. He said in John 16:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12–14 ESV)

Jesus said to the Apostles: “I’ve got way more content on all these issues but you can’t receive it now. After I’m gone up into heaven and I’ve sent my Holy Spirit, he will give you the rest. He will take from me and give it to you and you will teach it to my people” and we see the Apostle Paul doing that here in 1 Corinthians 7. In verses 12-16 he adds another potential grounds for divorce. Let’s read that now:

12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but

as it is, they are holy.

15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:12–16 NIV11-GK)

Therefore we might label Paul's second grounds for divorce as:

## **ii. Religiously motivated abandonment**

Now Paul is responding to a particular question that arose out of the experiences of the early church. Folks sent these questions to him and he is responding. People are asking: "If my husband and I were pagans when we got married and now I've come to Christ, but he hasn't, and he doesn't want to be married to a Christian, what should I do?"

Now obviously that question couldn't have been put to Jesus in his earthly life so we shouldn't even be surprised to see Paul addressing it here under the power of the Holy Spirit. This was bound to come up and Paul's counsel is very wise. He says basically that if the unbeliever is willing to stay in the marriage and to live with an active and obviously Christian woman, then by all means stay in the marriage. Who knows whether you will even save your husband – or just as possible – who knows husbands, whether you will save your wives?

However, if the unbelieving spouse does not want to stay in the marriage and does not want to live with an active and obvious Christian, then the believer should let them go. In such cases the believer is not bound – that is to say they are FREE TO REMARRY. The Pillar Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 for example says:

*Not bound* here refers to freedom to remarry. Instone-Brewer explains: "The only freedom that makes any sense in this context is the freedom to remarry ... [A]ll Jewish divorce certificates and most Greco-Roman ones contained the words 'you are free to marry any man you wish,' or something very similar."<sup>2</sup>

So the Apostle Paul adds a second reasonable exception to the general rule of marital permanence. If you were both unsaved when you got married and one of you has become a Christian and the other has not and the unbeliever desires to end the marriage, then let it be so. In

---

<sup>2</sup>Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 302.

such cases the believer is not bound and is free to remarry.

Those are the only 2 permissible grounds for divorce mentioned in the New Testament and that leads to our second question:

## 2. What About Physical Abuse?

Now the simple fact is that the Bible doesn't mention this. The Bible doesn't address every question that we might think to ask but I do think that there is enough content in the Bible for us to answer this question in a helpful way. The first thing we should notice is that the Bible disqualifies abusive men from serving as pastors or elders in the church. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul says:

1 If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded ... not a drunkard, **not violent but gentle**, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.... (etc.) (1 Timothy 3:1-4 ESV)

The Greek literally says “not a *plektes*” – not a “striker”. A man who hit his wife was disqualified from serving as an elder in the church. Now, most commentators understand the qualifications for an elder as simply the marks of an actual Christian. Paul is saying – make sure that your elders are SAVED and that they are GROWING in the direction of Jesus Christ. And saved and sanctified people don't hit their wives!

So I think we can say with absolute confidence that hitting your wife is a sin – a serious sin – a disqualifying sin – in the Bible. So if a woman is hit by her husband she should do two things immediately. First, she should call the police. The Bible says that the king does not bear the sword in vain:

For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:4 ESV)

The Bible says that God gives to the government the authority to restrain evil and to punish evildoers so if your husband hits you call the police. God gives guns and Tasers and handcuffs to the police FOR YOUR PROTECTION. Make good use of that. Their job is to restrain evil and the job of the courts is to punish the evildoer.

So the first thing you should do is call the police. Even if you are a Christian and commanded to forgive – call the police! You can forgive your husband while exposing him to the common grace of God. Often times rebuke and restraint and official and formal punishment is the grace of God in working repentance into sinners. Calling the police might be the most loving thing you could do to your husband – so do that first.

The second phone call should go to your pastor or to the chairman of the church Board. If your husband is a member of this church and he hits you we will immediately open a case of church discipline. And if he does not repent we will excommunicate him which means that we will publicly declare that we do not believe that he is a Christian. Because a Christian doesn't hit his wife – and if he does, he repents of it and he never does it again. So if he doesn't repent, we will declare him to be unsaved and that puts you back at exception #2. You are now a Christian women married to a declared unbeliever and you need to let him know that he is not going to get to keep hitting you. He is going to be in jail or he is going to be in recovery and accountability – those are the only options if he wants to stay in the marriage with you and if he doesn't want to stay in the marriage then you let him go – you are not bound. You are free to remarry.

Therefore, I do think that there is sufficient content in the Scriptures for us to handle this sort of situation wisely.

That leads us to our third question:

### **3. Must these particular sins lead to divorce?**

Thankfully this question is much easier to answer. The answer is no! This takes us right back into the text. The Pharisees said:

“Why then did Moses **command** one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 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. (Matthew 19:7–8 ESV)

Jesus corrects the misinterpretation of the Pharisees. Moses didn't command you to divorce in such circumstances – he permitted you. And he only did that because of the hardness of your

hearts. Hard hearts cause people to persist in sin and make it hard to forgive others but becoming a Christian is about getting a new heart – a soft heart filled with the Holy Spirit. Such a heart is capable of change in the direction of Jesus Christ and is capable of forgiving a brother or a sister of even the most grievous of sins.

Therefore there really is NO REASON for two Christians to ever get divorced. By the grace of God they can change and they can forgive.

Thanks be to God!

I want to spend just a few minutes now talking about how this teaching should be applied.

### **Application:**

I want to talk first about how it should be applied:

#### **1. To engaged believers**

We've had 3 couples from this church get engaged in the last 10 days. Praise the Lord! We have a number of other folks who are already engaged and several more couples moving towards engagement and to all of them let me say this: you need to assume that your marriage is forever. This is not a trial run; this is not a test drive, this is a sacred and binding covenant. If you aren't sure that this person is your forever friend, then get out now before you say "I do" in the sight of God and before gathered witnesses. If you are sure then be equally sure of this: for your marriage to survive you will need to do at least two things.

##### **i. You need to grow**

Right now you are a dangerous person. You are fully capable of committing terrible and egregious sins. You are capable of committing sexually immoral acts. When you become a Christian you don't become immune to sin. You become capable of obedience – but until Christ returns or you die you remain capable of sin. So you better grow. You better commit to the ordinary means of sanctification. Salvation is a one handed work – God does it, you receive it –

but sanctification is a two handed work – meaning God does stuff and you do stuff and if you don't do your stuff then you don't grow and you remain a hazard to everyone around you. So grow. If you love your future spouse start growing NOW.

The best gift you can give to your spouse and your future kids is your own sanctification.

The second thing you need to do if your marriage is going to survive is this:

ii. You need to forgive

Even while you grow you will sin against each other. You will. You are never less sanctified then you are on your wedding day – if you are a Christian you are going to grow little by little, day by day in the direction of Jesus – and therefore unless my understanding of space and time is completely messed up – you will never be more dangerous and more inclined to sin than on your wedding day. Which means that you will inevitably sin against your spouse and he or she will inevitably sin against you but thanks be to God Jesus told us what to do when that happens. He said:

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3 ESV)

Remember before you are husband and wife you are brother and sister in Christ. So if your brother or your sister sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him. That's how you handle it when it happens – and it surely will. You rebuke him. You don't ignore it – you bring it up, you work it through and you forgive. That's not optional. Jesus also said:

if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:15 ESV)

Again, the Bible says if you don't forgive your repenting spouse, then that just proves that you are not saved. Saved people forgive because God in Christ has forgiven them – so again, brothers and sisters about to be married, if you are truly Christians then there is no reason for you ever to get divorced. By the grace of God you can grow and you can forgive therefore your marriage can and will go the distance.



Secondly, we need to apply this teaching:

## **2. To struggling Christian couples**

If you are both believers and there has been significant, on-going sin in your marriage then you need to do the following:

### **i. You need to get help**

The Bible says that if your brother sins, rebuke him, if he repents forgive him. Cased closed. In most marriages we call that Thursday. There was sin, there was confrontation, there was honest apology, there was grace extended and there was dinner. Next. Right? It happens! We deal with it, we repent, we forgive – we move on!

Most sin in marriage can be dealt with in house. But what about sin that is on-going or unrepented of – what do we do then?

Well again, Jesus tells us what to do then. He says that if you have rebuked your brother or your sister and you haven't got anywhere – there hasn't been change or repentance then:

take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. (Matthew 18:16–17 ESV)

So I think we would say here that if step 1 doesn't work – the confront, repent, forgive step – then you go to step 2. Step 2 is where you involve outside help; you go see a counsellor or you go see the pastor. If that doesn't work you refer it to the church generally – which means, you initiate church discipline.

And if that doesn't work, then one of you is an unbeliever. That's what Jesus says in the very next verse, he says:

if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:17 ESV)

My crying out loud, he says, if you get all the way here and you haven't had repentance and

reconciliation then one of you is an unbeliever and needs to be declared as such by the church.

That is the process that we are supposed to go through. If your marriage is stuck, I'm guessing its because you haven't moved from step 1 to step 2 or from step 2 to step 3. If you are Christians you cannot simply sit on sin. You confront it, you confess it, your forgive it – and if that isn't happening then you get help! And if the help isn't helping then one of you isn't saved and we go back and we wrestle again with the Gospel so as to receive grace to grow and forgive.

Thirdly, we need to apply this teaching:

### **3. To the rightfully divorced**

So what if you divorced your husband or your wife because he or she persisted in unlawful sex or abandoned you because of your faith in Jesus Christ – what should you do now? The Bible provides two answers to that question.

i. Prayerfully consider a life of celibacy and dedicated service

We talked about that a couple of weeks ago – that's where Jesus goes in Matthew 19 – that's where Paul goes in 1 Corinthians 7. Pray about that first but also, pray about whether or not you should get remarried.

ii. Prayerfully consider remarriage – but only in the Lord

In 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 Paul says:

Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But if you marry, you have not sinned (1 Corinthians 7:27–28 NAS95)

Of course he goes on to add that you must marry a Christian. He says you can marry:

only in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39 ESV)

So, even in a time of persecution, when it might be better not to get married at all, Paul says,

those who are unbound are free to marry but only in the Lord.

Lastly, we need to apply this teaching:

#### **4. To the wrongfully divorced**

This is the hardest part. What about those who got divorced wrongfully? What about people who got divorced for sinful reasons and who now regret that and mourn over that with true repentance? Is there hope for people like that?

Before I answer that, let me be very clear about this. If you divorce your spouse for any reason other than the two we have mentioned today from the Bible, you are sinning. You are sinning against God and against your spouse and against your kids and I'm just not sure how a true believer knowingly and wilfully does that. In fact I think I would have to say that I don't think you are a believer if you do that.

However, what if that was something you did a long time ago, before you were a Christian or before you really understood what the Bible says about marriage and divorce? Well, first of all I think everyone would agree that whatever happened before you were a Christian is entirely wiped out by the blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible says:

as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (Psalms 103:12 ESV)

For crying out loud, you were a bunch of things before you came to Christ but all of that has been washed away now by the cleansing flow of the blood – thanks be to God! Whatever you did before you got saved is literally, water under the bridge. Its done, its over, its forgotten, it doesn't exist.

But what about the things you did as a baby Christian, before you really knew what the Bible said about such things? Can that be forgiven?

Well, on what basis would we say that it couldn't be? What does the Bible say?

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9 ESV)

So let's be clear, wrongful divorce is a sin, but its not the unforgiveable sin. If you confess that sin he is faithful and just to forgive you for that sin and to CLEANSE you from that unrighteousness.

So you are forgiven and you are free. You are free to remarry - but only in the Lord.

Now, I don't believe that I am out on a limb here. Jay Adams – the respected Biblical counsellor says in his book on marriage, divorce and remarriage:

In any discussion of divorce and remarriage we must be careful to preserve the integrity of two biblical truths: 1. Sin is heinous. 2. Grace is greater than the most heinous sin. So, we have seen that remarriage after divorce is allowed in the Bible and that the guilty party – after forgiveness – is free to remarry.”<sup>3</sup>

That's how I think we have to handle this as a church. We have to call sin SIN. We have to call a spade a spade. If you are thinking to divorce your wife so that you can marry a younger model – we have to call that what it is. SIN. And we have to do what we've got to do which is declare you an unbeliever if you persist in that sin. But if you truly repent of the sins you've done in the past then we have to believe in grace. We have to believe that the blood of Christ covers and obliterates human sin. We have to believe that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins AND TO CLEANSE US from all unrighteousness.

Because that's the Gospel! That's the Good News and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jay E. Adams, Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage In The Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 95.