

## **Kingdom Marriage – Matthew 19:1-12 – Pastor Tim Rech**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage has always been under attack in our world. But in these days we are living, it is under siege. Commitment to marriage is weak at best and the divorce statistics are appalling and inside the church. The impact on individuals and families is heartbreaking with large percentages of children growing up with divorced parents.

Equally concerning is how marriage has been redefined in our world over the last 20 years or so. Men are marrying men and women are marrying women. People are attempting to change their gender leading to further redefinition of marriage - and the list goes on. Right is now wrong and wrong is now right in marriage. And as it was in the time of the Judges, everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25).

But we ought not be surprised. The Lord has told us these days would come. We only need to stand on His Word in this area and be ready always to make defense of it.

Our text today is fitting in that way. For Jesus takes us back to God's standard. Let us pick up in 19:1-2.

### **MINISTRY ON THE MOVE (19:1-2)**

*Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. <sup>2</sup>And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.*

Jesus had just finished teaching his disciples on repentance and forgiveness in their relationships with one another. So far Jesus's ministry had only been in the region of Galilee but now it was over. He is now on the move from there to the Judean region. He was making His final journey to Jerusalem and to the cross so that the foretelling of His death and resurrection might be fulfilled. We could actually stop right here and go back to worship. For our very life is/was bound up in Jesus resolute journey to the place of His ultimate sacrifice – the cross. (and greatest act of forgiveness demonstrated)

Now although He arrived in Judea, it was not time yet to go to Jerusalem. Rather He went beyond the Jordan east of Jerusalem and north of Jericho – if you remember, this is where His ministry launched in 3:13 with a baptism and an authentication from the Father saying, *“This is My Beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased.”* (Matthew 3:17)

The disciples were with Him and so were the crowds and just like in Galilee, the crowds followed Him everywhere and always. Although Jesus was in a different location, His ministry was the same. The crowds again gathered to Him and again He healed them. What a scene. Every physical ailment imaginable was being healed by Jesus – healing power unseen before and not seen on earth since.

But sadly, unbelief and outright opposition sought to obscure what Jesus was doing. His enemies were back again in 19:3.

### **DIVORCE FOR ANY CAUSE? (19:3-9)**

<sup>3</sup> And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ***“Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”*** <sup>4</sup> He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup> 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’? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” <sup>7</sup> They said to him, ***“Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?”*** <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

### **Same Antagonist – Different Question (19:3)**

Like fingernails on a chalkboard were the blind Pharisees as they broke into the scene. Such is the case when legalism barges into the midst of ministry.

So what they are up to now? Well, they approached again with the same agenda - to test Jesus over matters of the Law and their traditions. This was not the first time the Pharisees had tested Jesus in Matthew and it would not be the last. This time they aim to confront him in the area of marriage and divorce. To them He was a mere man – one who had to eventually slip and fall into their schemes and traps.

Note there is no, “Excuse us sir” but rather a blunt question in verse 3: ***“Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?”*** Oblivious to the miracles taking place all around them, the Pharisees simply charge onto the scene again with their loaded questions. How about a question on, “how do you heal these people Jesus?” Or “tell us more about the resurrection?” Oh no, they are only here to pose some trick questions.

#### *The Question's Background (Deuteronomy 24:1)*

Now the Pharisees' question is intended for Jesus to take a side on a widely debated issue among the Jewish people in that day. To help us understand this view, let us begin by hearing Deuteronomy 24:1:

*“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, <sup>2</sup> and if...*

The passage then goes on to prohibit a first husband from remarrying his former wife after divorcing her and she marries another and her second husband either divorces her also or he dies. But notice the man's reason for pursuing a divorce. It is *“because he has found some indecency in her”*. What is the definition of indecency? Among the rabbis in Israel in that day, the interpretations ranged between a liberal and a conservative view. Kent Hughes writes:

*The liberal interpretation said a man could divorce a woman for the smallest “offense” such as cooking a poor dinner, walking with her hair down in public, speaking to another man, or speaking disrespectfully of her mother in-law. Some even said he had grounds if he found another woman more beautiful.*

*The conservative view limited indecency to acts that suggested only the possibility of sexual misconduct; for example, an act of shameful exposure. This view only considered divorce for acts of marital impropriety short of adultery. <sup>1</sup>*

So note this debate was not speaking to divorce for adultery; the breaking of the marriage covenant. The Old Testament was clear on this situation. Leviticus 20:10 says:

*“If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

And Deuteronomy 22:22 says:

*“If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.*

So the remedy was straightforward; both parties caught in adultery were to be put to death. But this was not what the Pharisees were asking about. They wanted to hear what Jesus thought about the justification for divorce short of the act of adultery.

This was the controversy into which the Pharisee’s wanted to pull Jesus. They wanted to exploit his response for their own advantage. Maybe Jesus could help advance their defective position one way or the other or better yet, trap Him in His words.

However, the Pharisees question revealed their wrong understanding of marriage and divorce. The question was misplaced for the divorce debate of the day was being argued from the wrong vantage point – one of conservative vs liberal and about the degree to which divorce could be applied. To them, the existence of divorce in their minds was a given and the only question left was to what extent was its justification acceptable.

### **Back to Genesis (19:4-6)**

But Jesus does not follow them down this line of thinking. Instead, He resets the thinking of Israel’s teachers of God’s Law with God’s real view on marriage and divorce.

Jesus takes the Pharisees back to basics or rather to the beginning. He does not point to Deuteronomy 24 but rather to Genesis 1 and 2. For this is where God’s unchanging standard of and design for marriage stood. In this, the Pharisees, the crowd, and the disciples would see that the debate was being argued on the wrong ground.

In verse 4, Jesus, in the form of a question, quotes Gen. 1:27 directly:

*“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,”*

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2015), p. 234

So God created men and women. And He intended marriage to be between a man and a woman. Is there really any question about this? We cannot be sure in our day and age.

And then in verses 5 He quotes Gen. 2:24:

*<sup>5</sup> 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'?*

In verse five Jesus stresses intimacy. There is no more intimate earthly relationship. We love our children and our parents deeply and treasure those relationships. But the marriage relationship is far deeper than parent to child. In fact, our children came from us but we are not one flesh with them. We are only one flesh with our spouse. This is what God has ordained in marriage.

And in the latter half of verse five and through verse 6, Jesus stresses permanence. God says they are no longer two but one flesh and there is no pulling them apart – the two no longer exist. Jesus's math was not the same as His hearers. One plus one did not equal two but rather one. Man is not to try and separate two marriage people – either from within the marriage or those outside it.

There is no room in God's model for divorce. Pre-nuptial agreements are far from biblical. Marriage is meant to be between a man and woman, to be intimate, and to endure throughout this life. The model is not one with which to tamper. Jesus authenticates its OT teaching so it cannot be dismissed as Old Covenant. The entrance of sin into this world did not alter its ideal and standard, nor has man's miserable adherence to such a standard. If you remember Malachi 2:14-16, God has and always will hate divorce. Breaking of this covenant between a man and a woman (physical or spiritual) is a major theme of God's indictment against sinful man throughout the Scriptures.

Jesus is serious about marriage and has always had intention for it. Let not man redefine it or play around with definitions to wiggle in and out of it. In fact, Ephesians 5 uses the model of marriage to show us what the relationship between Christ and His church looks like.

Tampering with marriage directly opposes God which is what the Pharisees were doing that day with Jesus. Notice Jesus took them back to the Genesis. Antagonistic unbelief from those who claim they can see and understand all things perfectly need no further answer. Jesus simply answers their loaded question with the truth – with God's standard – something we need to do as well in the crooked day in which we live.

### **Divorce Instituted or Regulated? (19:7-8)**

Unaffected by Jesus' answer to their first question, the Pharisees come right back with a follow up, <sup>7</sup> .... ***"Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"***

Perhaps they thought they had Jesus now. In their minds, He was at odds with Deuteronomy 24. Was He? No, rather it was the other way around. They were misusing the text.

Jesus tells them in verse 8, *"Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.*

Hardness of heart in Israel had always been the problem when it came to marriage (as it is today). Men divorcing their wives for all kinds of reasons was common. Therefore Moses wisely made provision for hard hearts and vulnerable wives. He did not command or institute divorce so as to give license for any and all reasons to divorce.

In Deuteronomy 24:1, such regulation by Moses involved a requirement – that the husband provide a certificate of divorce to his wife for her protection. She needed protection else a man could divorce, marry someone else and divorce again, and then try and remarry her again for financial gain. The woman was at risk for being treated like a piece of property and was at the mercy of the husband's whim. "The certificate also declared to society that she was free to remarry.... else she would become a social outcast and be treated like a prostitute. No man would want to marry her and she would be defenseless and destitute."<sup>2</sup> This concession by Moses recognized man's weakness and sinfulness and he reluctantly regulated the practice to protect the offended wife.

Jesus again returns them to God's standard in verse 8, "...but from the beginning it was not so." Divorce was never part of God's plan for marriage. And such an allowance by Moses did not negate the fact that divorce for any cause was sinful and outside of God's will for marriage.

### **God's Position (19:9)**

Jesus then clearly settles the matter in verse 9:

*<sup>9</sup>And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

Unless sexual immorality is the cause, divorce is not permitted.

The "*except for sexual immorality*" is called the exception clause. It is the one exception Jesus gives here for divorce. Sexual immorality refers to all manner of sexual sin that includes adultery, homosexuality, incest, bestiality, prostitution, and the like – any sexual activity not authorized by God.

Adultery is primarily in view here in Matthew 19. It refers to the breaking of the covenant of companionship with the person to whom they are married. Adultery occurs when a third party shows up and begins filling that role for the adulterous spouse. Adultery is unfaithfulness by the sinning spouse and could involve not only a physical aspect as well as an emotional / companionship one as well.

It is important to note that many falsely believe sexual immorality equals and is limited to adultery only. But Jesus is speaking to the broader category of all sexual activity and acts outside of marriage. Any of these acts are cause for the offended spouse to divorce and adultery is just one type.

Jesus commands here that a spouse can only divorce his or her spouse for sexual immorality and not for any other reason he or she devises. To do otherwise is to commit adultery.

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<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Vol. 1* (Colorado Springs, Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), p. 144

Now is sexual immorality the only exception given in the Scriptures? It is the only one given by Jesus in Matthew 19.

But there is actually a second biblical cause for a divorce. Jesus did not speak to this point Himself but rather through the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul provides principles for a number of real life marriages issues arising in the church and in the culture. After clearly stating that a husband or wife should never divorce his or her spouse in 7:10-11, Paul speaks to marriages where one spouse is an unbeliever in 7:12-16. He teaches that if the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain married to the believer, then the believer should not seek a divorce. But if the unbeliever leaves with no intention of returning, then the believer is to let him or her go. The believer in this case is not bound but can marry another in the future without sinning. This scenario often arises when two unbelievers marry and one is later saved and not the other. This is what was happening in Corinth. This exception is called abandonment or willful desertion by the unbelieving spouse. When this occurs, the believing spouse can choose to let him or her go.

Remember that if a believer leaves another believer then the offended spouse is not to let them go but pursue them. This is where the church intervenes on behalf of the offended party per the Bible's authorization and prescription (remember Matthew 18 from last week). If the offending spouse does not listen to the church, they are ultimately declared an unbeliever, then the believing / unbelieving spouse scenario applies.

So the Bible teaches there are two reasons where divorce is permitted; one is for sexual immorality and the other is for desertion by an unbelieving spouse. However, we need to remember a couple of things here:

- 1) Jesus (and Paul) are only permitting divorce for these two things yet not commanding them. God's will for His people is always to work out the marriage offense in true repentance and forgiveness. In fact, if the offending spouse repents, the offended spouse needs to forgive and work towards ultimate reconciliation. This can be difficult and will take some time to work through but in the light of the gospel, this is what God requires of His people.
- 2) When working with marriage and divorce issues, we must be careful to proceed by the Spirit in truth, love, prayer, compassion, and much wisdom so as to get it right before God. There are a myriad of scenarios which can occur. And for each, we must seek and apply wisdom and discernment relying upon the Word and prayer.

Now we must see this passage and where it fits within the theme of Matthew differently. It must not be a new law code of do's and don'ts. "Look here...look there...gotcha!" Rather we must see God's unchanging plan in Genesis for the married couple – *hold fast* to one another. And then we must also see the gospel – forgive as we saw in the last chapter – seventy times seven. Forgiveness can be hard but again it is what God requires of married citizens in the kingdom.

### **THE HIGH CALLING OF THE KINGDOM (19:10-12)**

*<sup>10</sup> The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." <sup>11</sup> But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. <sup>12</sup> 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."*

The Pharisee's response to Jesus final Word on their question is not given to us. Having been stymied by Jesus once again, they probably just slipped away to regroup for another run at Him later.

### **The Disciples Conclusion (19:10)**

But the disciples had something to say in verse 10. Despite Jesus having taught them this already back in Matthew 5:31-32, it seems they still held to the prevailing casual attitude of the day concerning marriage and divorce. And now hearing Jesus shutdown the most popular reasons for divorce, they saw the marriage as hopeless - something to avoid altogether.

They did not understand the high calling God attached to marriage. A man and a woman joined together by God who become one flesh. The husband is to cherish and sacrificially love his wife and the wife is to respect and submit to her husband. The husband is to love his wife as Christ selflessly loves the church and the wife is to submit to her husband as unto the Lord and as the church submits to Christ. This is commanded by God and pleasing to Him.

But marriage is difficult you might say. Yes, it can be. Two people each with a sin nature experience problems. But this is where the gospel enters. When we fail, we confess to one another, we repent, and we forgive. How often shall we do this? Well, seventy times seven and beyond. This is where God is glorified.

Where are you today? Do you see marriage as hopeless?

### **Jesus' Surprising Response (19:11-12)**

Now Jesus' answer to the disciples in verses 11-12 is surprising. Note He does not give them a pep talk about marriage or point them to the latest Hallmark movie. He has stated God's high view of marriage and that it is truly good. And by the Word and the Holy Spirit's enabling grace, people can and will successfully navigate marriage.

Rather He elevates their thinking about the kingdom by pointing to a single minded devotion to it. He says consider the eunuch. Eunuchs are single and not sexually active for three reasons; those who are born unable to, those who are made that way by men, and those who choose to be eunuchs. The ones who choose to be like eunuchs are given this desire by God. But not everyone can follow the disciples' conclusion back in verse 10. Most desire to get married and that is a good thing.

But see Jesus' point here. *"The kingdom of heaven is so important that it should seem perfectly normal if someone would want to give up marriage for it."*<sup>3</sup> (O'Donnell, p 543). The gospel is paramount – all other things (marriage, family as important as they are) should serve the gospel. Jesus is not extolling the virtue of singleness for singleness sake but rather a single minded devotion to the kingdom. So whether you are married or single, the kingdom and its gospel take first place.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2013), p. 543

## REFLECT AND RESPOND

- Marriage is God's design – intimate and permanent and may no man break it – this is the model and contrary to the world, divorce is not in view
- The Bible permits divorce in narrow terms but regardless of the offense, God's will is always for a husband and wife to humbly reconcile through true repentance and forgiveness from the heart
- Are you surprised by Jesus and His teaching on marriage and divorce?
  - Is it too restrictive and confining?
    - Perhaps you have a casual attitude in your heart about marriage
    - "One strike and you are out", "the love is gone", "we are too different", etc
  - Or does it seem impossible?
  - Need to repent - depart from the world in this area
- Do you use the Bible's teaching as a defense for not growing and changing in your marriage? - in effect saying to your spouse, "you cannot divorce me; therefore you will have to just live with me. I am who am I. Do not expect me to change." How we live with and treat our spouse reflects our relationship to the Lord – how are you doing?
- Brothers and sisters – perhaps you find yourself with deep scars from a past divorce – repent and ask for forgiveness where needed, forgive where needed, seek the Lord, and then rest in His grace – there is nothing you have done that cannot be taken to the throne of grace for mercy and cleansing – Christ died for these things as well
- Marriage requires the character of Christ; dying to self, putting your spouse first, loving deeds, and walking in His truth. It is all part of the cross kind of life. How are you doing?
- Remember we are citizens of the kingdom and may our singleness or our marriage always serve the gospel of the kingdom and its King



